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OR,

The Mystery of the Mountain League.

A Strange Story of Southwest Colorado.

BY WILLIAM G. PATTEN,

AUTHOR OF "DISMAL DAVE'S DANDY PARD,"
"CAPTAIN MYSTERY," "OLD BOMBSHELL,"
ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE MYSTERIOUS MOUNTAIN PROPHET.

A few years after the close of the Civil War a party of emigrants pushed far down into Southwestern Colorado and made a final halt in a lovely valley, through which flowed one of the many tributaries of the San Juan River. There, amid the mountain wilds, they discovered a

AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE THE HUNTED GIRL TOLD HER STORY, AND BOTH OLD MISERY
AND HIS DOG LISTENED WITH INTEREST

beautiful and fertile country, which was well adapted for grazing and agriculture. Indeed, the little valley in which they decided to settle was so picturesque and beautiful that Ethna Lakeman gave it the name of "Eden Vale," and the entire party accepted the title.

The emigrants were nearly all Southern people who, when the war was ended, found their fortunes vanished and their future prospects looking decidedly uninviting and gloomy. Believing that the South was irreparably ruined, they had seized the first opportunity that, with their limited means, enabled them to move from the war-blackened land. Major Hugh Lakeman, whose daughter had named the valley where they finally halted, had been an officer in the Southern army and was the instigator of the emigration scheme, in which he was joined by many of his friends and neighbors. His wife and only child accompanied him, together with a young negro called "Skibo," who had begged on his knees not to be left behind by "Missy Efna."

Ethna Lakeman was a beautiful and accomplished girl of eighteen who had the dark hair and liquid-black eyes of a Southern maid together with the pink cheeks and ripe red lips that made her a picture fair to look upon. Her perfect contour of figure would have delighted the eye of an artist, and her every move and pose were natural and graceful. Like most Southern girls of that time, she was an accomplished horsewoman, and her persistent riding had done much to add to her natural grace and good looks. She had a musical voice which was usually regulated to a low pitch, but when she wished she could utter a clear and ringing shout that would reach a remarkable distance. She was not afraid of firearms and could handle rifle or revolver with a fair degree of skill. She was idolized by her parents and admired and loved by all who knew her.

There was another girl with the emigrants who was a little younger than Ethna, a little less refined and a little wilder. She was accompanying her father into the wilds, her mother having been dead for many years, which probably accounted for her hoydenish ways. But, although all of Maggie Renan's acts could not have been called ladylike, still there was a certain infectious jollity about them all that served better than an apology and kept her from being offensive at any time. Indeed, so merry-hearted was the sprightly little creature that the people of the party called her "Merry Maggie," a name which seemed quite appropriate.

Maggie could ride a horse as well as Ethna, and could climb a tree a great deal better. During the long march toward the setting sun the two girls were almost constantly together, and, despite Maggie's wild ways, Ethna became greatly attached to the gay-spirited maid. And Maggie laughingly asserted that Ethna was "just boss." But Ethna was discerning enough to see that her little friend was the possessor of a fiery temper when it was once aroused.

The emigrants were extremely fortunate in reaching Eden Vale without any trouble of a serious nature befalling them, and they set about building cabins there in the heart of the towering mountains, all being light-hearted and cheerful. The sounds of the ax, hammer and saw, mingled with the merry voices of the women and children and the songs of the laboring men, resounded through the once quiet valley and must have startled the grim old mountains so accustomed to silence and solitude. The white-topped wagons, which had served the emigrants as homes for many a dreary day, were drawn up in a square close beside the rippling river, for they must still be used until the cabins were completed. The horses and the horned cattle that had survived the long march—not a few had died—were grazing in the valley, which was guarded above and below to prevent them from wandering away.

Major Lakeman took care that the settlement was laid out in a regular manner, and, though nearly all of the first settlers built their cabins on a single street, other streets and "avenues" were planned and staked off. By general though unspoken consent the major was looked upon as the chief magnate of Eden Vale, and all matters of importance requiring a decision were referred to him. Although he wielded a singular influence over all who associated or had dealings with him, Major Hugh was not the least inclined to be important or self-conceited in his manner; instead, he was one of those free-and-easy persons who had a smile and cheerful word for all. It was said that, with his men, in the army, he had been very popular, yet that his superior officers had not liked him overmuch.

Mrs. Lakeman, unlike her daughter, did not enjoy very good health, but it was hoped that

the change of climate would be to her advantage. She stood the journey very well.

The cabins drew rapidly to completion and soon the settlers were able to move into them one by one. Then the white tops were removed from the wagons and the place began to assume the appearance of a promising young town.

One day Skibo, the young negro, came rushing up to the major, appearing both excited and frightened. In a faltering manner he declared that he had seen a strange man with a long white beard who was regarding the camp from an overhanging mountain crag. The stranger had stood there for several minutes and then suddenly disappeared. After questioning the timid darky concerning the strange person whom he claimed to have seen, the magnate of Eden Vale concluded that he had seen nothing at all, but that his imagination had conjured up a figure on the crag.

Major Hugh, however, was to learn that Skibo had really seen all that he claimed.

The very next day after this occurrence a ragged, wild-eyed and apparently half-starved man wandered into Eden Vale. This new-comer, a Spaniard, gave his name as Jose Costillo, and told a story that aroused the settlers' sympathies so that they sheltered and fed him, little dreaming how the treacherous scoundrel would repay them for their kindness. He said that with two companions, he had been prospecting amid the mountains to the westward. One night they had been attacked by a strange band of men who were dressed in black and his comrades had been slain, he alone escaping in the darkness. In the morning he had returned and buried his friends, first finding a slip of paper pinned on the breast of each. The crumpled bits of paper he produced, and Major Lakeman saw that there was writing upon both slips. The words were the same on both pieces and formed one terrible warning sentence, apparently written in blood.

"Woe to those who trespass on the territory sacred to the Mystic League!"

Strange words!

The major asked Costillo if he knew anything of the "Mystic League," whereupon the Spaniard swore roundly in his own language.

"Know it!" he exclaimed. "The devil's own league is known well in all the country far down toward the line of Old Mexico. They are strange, fierce men, no one knows for what purpose banded. They move like the wind and as silently as spirits. Beware of them, señor, for they leave death behind them wherever they go."

"Are they outlaws?" asked the major.

"So some say, señor," was the reply. "I know not, but I do know that they are to be dreaded and feared. They killed my comrades, and I think myself fortunate to escape. Beware of them."

For a time the dark-eyed Spaniard stopped at Eden Vale. He found friends, although there were a few who put little confidence in his story. Rufus Renan, Maggie's father, was one of the doubters, and he did not hesitate to express his opinion in language not easily misunderstood.

"That Spaniard's er snake, shore's ye'r' born, sah," nodded the old man, who had been a plantation overseer in his younger days, and had acquired many of the quaint expressions of the slaves. "Can't fool this coon 'bout that. I don't believe er word of his yarn. Who ever heard tole of er Spaniard goin' inter er dangerous country to hunt fo' gold! All bosh, sah, all bosh! I can see treachery an' deceit in them brack eyes—yes I can! That rascal can't be trusted. Look out for him!"

And in the end it proved that Rufus was right.

Shortly after the cabins were all completed one of the men found some gold-bearing quartz in the vicinity of the valley, which came near proving a very unlucky strike, just then, for many were seized with the "gold fever" and a few went to prospecting for placers. Major Lakeman realized that this was a bad thing for them to do just at that time, for the summer was almost gone and the autumn might be followed by a severe winter during which the snow would block them in from the rest of the world. He knew nothing of the winter season in that region, but believed that it was good policy to be prepared for the worst.

The major lost no time in having a talk with the men and urging them to let gold-hunting alone for that season and make preparations for the winter. Not a few saw the wisdom of his words and heeded them. They all knew that they had no facilities for working a quartz mine, and placer hunting was very precarious and uncertain work. Gold would not provide them with food if they were shut in by snow for a

long time, so they went about laying in provisions as they could secure which, add the supply they had brought with them, would carry them safely through the dreary months.

But there was trouble of an unexpected nature in store for Eden Vale.

One night soon after the sun had crept down behind the western mountains, a strange figure appeared in the little settlement. Apparently an aged man, for his hair and beard were long and almost snowy-white. But, whatever the stranger's age, he did not show it in figure or his gait. He walked quite erect, his shoulders thrown back as a young man might have done, and he had no staff to assist him. He was strangely attired in a robe formed of the skins of animals, which was worn on the hairy side outward. His head was covered, and his whole appearance was such that one's fancy might lead him to believe resemblance to some of the prophets of early Bible times.

As soon as Skibo, the darky, saw the singular man, he drew back, crying:

"F— goodness sakes! dat's de berry same son dis 'coon saw on de mo'ntin lookin' do' de cabins—it am shuah!"

Near the center of the little settlement the unknown halted and, lifting one hand above his head, cried in a clear voice:

"Hearken unto me, ye men from the rising sun! Gather nigh and listen to my words, for I speak naught but the truth and I am here to give warning."

When nearly all of the settlers had gathered within hearing distance, the men at the front, the women a little back and the children behind them all, he spoke again:

"Ye have come into the wilderness to find home, but you shall find trouble and distress. You be beset with enemies who will harass ye make your life one of constant trials. Beware the red-men who shall come up from beyond the river, for they claim that all this land belongs to them; but, more than all else, beware the terrible band of red-handed demons who call themselves the Mystic League of the San Juan! They are beings with white faces and black hair. Beware, beware!"

"He's crazy!" exclaimed Rufus Renan, in a low tone.

"Without a doubt," admitted Major Lakeman.

Once more the mad prophet went on:

"I have come to watch over ye. On yon mountain crag I shall kindle a fire that shall burn by day and by night. While you can see its smoke or light you may know that I am near. But I cannot keep away the trouble which may come. I can only warn ye that ye may be prepared. Woe! woe! woe!"

He lifted his hands above his head and uttered a wailing cry which was answered in a startled manner. There was a harsh, blood-curdling shriek that chilled the blood in the veins of the brave settlers, then a huge black bird swooped down from the heights and remained poised over the head of the mad prophet. It was the singular bird ever seen in that region, being as large as the mighty condor of South America and in very many respects like that monster bird of prey. But the settlers were startled and amazed at seeing where the head of the bird should have been what appeared to be the head of an animal with gleaming, fiery eyes!

At the sight of this singular winged creature Jose Costillo gasped out something in Spanish and sank face downward on the ground, evidently overwhelmed with terror.

Without another word, the strange white-headed old man turned and walked swiftly away, the black bird circling above his head and occasionally giving utterance to its harsh rasping shriek. And in silent awe, not unmixed with fear, the settlers watched the singular pale man and bird had disappeared.

That night far up on the apparently unapproachable mountain crag a red light twinkled and gleamed like a bright star.

CHAPTER II.

THE SERPENT IN EDEN.

NEEDLESS to say, the appearance of the strange old man and still stranger bird created great excitement in Eden Vale. When the canny pair had disappeared the terrified Spaniard sat up and looked around, still muttering in his native language. Some of the men near at hand were excitedly discussing the strange appearance and the singular and ominous warning which they had heard, but for a time Costillo paid no attention to them. Finally their words caught his ears and he listened. A moment later he sprung up and approached them, crying:

out something in Spanish, apparently having forgotten that they could not understand him.

"What are you trying to get off?" demanded one of the men. "How do you expect a fellow to understand such gibberish?"

"*Diabolo!*" cried Jose. "The devil bird—the Winged Demon! He lives on the blood of the newly dead! Oh, the fiend!"

The Spaniard's words were startling to say the least. It was plain that he was not shamming when he appeared frightened, for he was still trembling and his face was white with fear. He seemed very much in earnest when he cried out that the black bird which they had lately seen lived on the blood of the newly dead.

"A vampire!" exclaimed one of the men, who heard Costillo's declaration. "I have heard of such critters."

They gathered around Jose and questioned him, but the fellow spoiled the impression that he had made by declaring that the Winged Demon, as he called the bird, could talk when it chose to do so, and that it spoke English. This was so preposterous that the entire party except Skibo ridiculed the idea.

"By gollum!" chattered the darky, whose knees were still trembling from his recent terror. "I don't doubt hit. If dat critter had er brack bird's body an'de head ob er big cat, w'v fo' cawn't he toke, dat am de quesum. Fo' e Lawd's sakes, I jes' want ter go back to ole Virginny!"

"The nigger an' the Spaniard will meek er good team ter hitch tergether!" declared Rufus Renan, in disgust.

"*Caramba!*" breathed Costillo, darting a black look toward the bold speaker. Then aloud: "You will learn that Jose Costillo speaks the truth."

With this the dark-faced man turned and walked deliberately away.

That night the visitation of the mad prophet and the strange bird with the head of an animal was thoroughly discussed in Eden Vale, and scores of wonderful, blood-chilling stories of birds and beasts that sucked the blood of human beings were told, filling the children, who lay awake in their rude beds to listen, with visions of horror, which haunted them all the night in their dreams. Through the little settlement passed the report that there was a light on the mountain-side, and before they slept, every man and woman took a long, wondering look at it.

The following day was bright and sunny, as most of the days that had preceded it since the party had stopped in the valley. The morning sunlight seemed to dispel the cloud of gloom which had settled over the place the night before, and the men went cheerfully about their work, although they did not banish all thoughts of their weird visitors of the previous night.

In the early morning sunshine Ethna Lakeman wandered down the little river till she had almost passed beyond sight of the settlement. She walked with bowed head, taking little heed of the glorious beauties of nature which were on every side of her, for her thoughts had wandered back along the trail over which the emigrants had come. Before her mind's eye was the frank, open face of a manly-appearing youth who had traveled with them for three days, and at parting had promised to meet her again. While advancing in this manner she heard a footfall, and glanced quickly up to see a square-shouldered young fellow standing before her, rifle in hand.

"Ah, Dick!" she cried, recoiling a step and smiling faintly, "how you startled me!"

"I beg yer pardon, Miss Ethna," said the youth, lifting his hat with rude courtesy. "I didn't mean ter skeer ye, fer I never clapped eyes onter ye tell jest er minute afore ye looked up. I didn't know ye wuz comin' out this way, but I'm glad ye come."

Ethna pretended not to hear the young man's last words, for she feared that he was attempting to approach a subject that was distasteful to her. She knew very little of Richard Bowen, who had been picked up by the train while it was crossing the great plains, but she did know that the young man, who was rather good-looking, although illiterate, had formed an affection for her and had attempted to declare it once. Only her skill at turning the subject had saved her from listening to his declaration of love and giving him an answer that would have been unpleasant for the bold young suitor to hear. Since that time she had avoided him whenever she could, but now she had unexpectedly come upon him and they were quite alone. She felt certain that he would make another attempt to tell her of his misplaced affection if she gave him an opportunity.

"Oh, you did not frighten me to speak of, Mr. Bowen," she said, quickly.

"*Mister Bowen!*" he repeated, looking a trifle hurt. "Why won't you call me Dick, Miss Ethna. That's good ernuff fer me an' I like it a deal better than ther other way. I hain't no mister, 'specially ter you."

"Dick seems almost too familiar on so short acquaintance," smiled the girl.

"On short acquaintance?" repeated the youth. "Why, it seems ez if I had known you alwus. I don't know why, but ther fu'st time I saw you I felt like we wuz acquainted. I alwus wuz afeerd of gals tell I saw you, but there was suthing 'bout your ways an' your face that made me feel like I'd knowed you fer years. You hain't like other girls. I reckon I'm bold, but I'm goin' ter tell ye now that I love you, Ethna."

The declaration was made so suddenly that the girl had not the opportunity to interrupt him. She flashed a startled look into his face and saw that his broad breast was rising and falling tumultuously and his face was very white, making it evident that he had fairly forced the hurried words from his lips, probably fearing that his courage would fail him. At that moment she fancied that he looked almost handsome.

"Don't speak yet, Ethna!" he quickly entreated, probably anticipating what she would say. "Jest hear all I have ter say, please. I know that what I hev done may seem bold, but I c'u'dnt help it 'cause it seemed that I must tell ye. I know what you'll think; I know you'll say that I'm ignorant an' 'way below ye, so that ye can't hev ennythin' ter do with me. I don't purtend ter be ez good ez you—I'd lick ther feller that did! No man kin ever be your equal, but so fur ez book learnin' goes, I kin git that, an' ef you'll jest give me er leetle encouragement, I'll promise ye that you'll hev no cause ter be 'shamed of Dick Bowen fer er husban'. I'll study night an' day—I'll do ennything fer you—I'd die fer ye!"

It is impossible to tell how much pain the rough fellow's words gave the one to whom they were addressed, for at that moment she believed them to come direct from the heart. He had not approached her, but there was something in his attitude that made every word seem very impressive. His head was uncovered, his left hand holding his hat at his side.

Ethna dropped her eyes to the ground and hesitated, for she knew not how to reply so as to hurt her strange suitor's feelings as little as possible. Her hesitation seemed to give Dick new courage and hope, for he went on eagerly:

"I know I may seem rather rough, Ethna, but I am not the worst feller in ther world. You might—"

But the girl threw up her hands with a desperate gesture of warning.

"Stop, Dick!" she cried, her face showing how deeply she was moved. "Do not allow yourself to build any false hopes that can never be realized."

She never forgot the look that came over his face. He understood her meaning in an instant, and recoiled with a little gasp of despair, involuntarily dropping his hat and extending an appealing hand.

"Don't say it—don't!" he entreated, hoarsely. "I know I hev been er fool, but I thought that you wuz different than other girls—I thought perhaps you c'u'd read my heart an'—an'—"

He faltered and stopped, then with a sudden effort, he seemed to throw off the weakness which had assailed him and straighten to his full height, throwing back his broad shoulders.

"I'd orter knowed it," he said, bitterly. "Reckon I did know it, but still I wuz fool enough ter hope. Well, this is ther end of my castle-buildin'. I wish I'd never seen you!" with a fierceness that startled her.

"I am so sorry!" she said, faintly, scarcely knowing what words she uttered. "I am sure you cannot blame me. I did not encourage you, for there is—there is—another—"

"What!" he almost shouted. "Ah-a! I understand it now! Why didn't I see afore! It's that long-haired young feller as wuz with ther train er day or two. An' who is he? He called bissell Mountain Frank, an' tolle er pretty yarn, but I'll bet he's some adventurer. You know less of him than of me, yet you admit that you love him! He kin talk mighty smooth, an' fer that reason he has stepped atween us. Curse him!" and in his rage and excitement the young fellow dropped his rifle and smote his clinched fists together.

Ethna's feelings suddenly underwent a remarkable change and her cheeks flamed scarlet.

"Look here, Dick Bowen!" she cried, taking

a step toward the angry fellow, one hand outstretched, "you have presumed altogether too far. What right have you to speak of Mountain Frank in that manner? What right have you to infer that I care more for Mountain Frank than for any other young man? What right have you to curse him? I was sorry for you when I found that you had made the mistake which your words indicated and I pitied you, but if you are not careful, I shall hate you."

Before he said anything further the youth who had met with such a bitter disappointment stooped and picked up his rifle. He regarded her beautiful face, now flushed with anger, for several seconds, a light of admiration and longing in his eyes, then he said, steadily:

"I do not ask for your pity, and I hope that Mountain Frank an' I may never meet. Good-by!"

He whirled swiftly and walked rapidly away down the river. Before she could recover sufficiently to call to him he had passed from sight.

A moment later several shrill cries for help came from the point beyond which Dick Bowen had disappeared. Evidently some one was in terror and distress, and Ethna recognized the voice as that of her friend, Maggie Renan. Uttering a little exclamation the major's daughter darted swiftly forward. In a moment a surprising scene met her gaze.

Dick Bowen was shaking Costillo, the Spaniard, till the dark-faced wretch's teeth rattled, while Merry Maggie was standing near by laughing, clapping her hands and crying:

"Stir him up, Dick! That will set his blood to circulating! I think the nasty black-faced baboon will learn better than to hug me again in that way and try to kiss me when there is a better man around. Ha! ha! ha! Look at his eyes, for goodness' sake! You can hang your hat on 'em, Dick."

Jose was swearing in Spanish and pleading in English in the same breath, appearing badly frightened. Young Bowen was not hurting the fellow very much, but was giving him such a shaking that it seemed a wonder Jose remained in his clothes. Possibly Dick was glad of an opportunity to relieve his feelings in some way.

"There, Dick," said Maggie, as soon as she could speak from laughing after the unlucky Costillo had uttered a string of broken Spanish oaths, "that will do and I am much obliged for your kindness in giving this gentleman a taste of your muscle. Now, *Mister Car-r-r-rama*, I advise you to skip, slide, *get out* before I get at you and put a corresponding fresco around one or two of those black eyes of yours."

The downfallen wretch lost no time in taking the "hint," but, as he moved away, he shook his fist toward the youth and the girl and muttered several savage threats in his own language. It was plain he would not soon forget the humiliation and rough treatment he had received, and from that hour Dick Bowen had a deadly enemy.

Dick now saw Ethna approaching. Instantly he picked up his rifle and, saying a few low, hasty words to the girl whom he had befriended, once more hastened away down the river.

"Oh, Ethna!" cried the little romp, as soon as the major's daughter was near enough, hurrying forward to meet her. "Did you see the fun? It was great! That sneaking Spaniard tried to kiss me. He came upon me walking here all alone and the first thing I knew I was in his arms. Then you bet I did fetch a squawk that must have sounded like an old hen who was afraid her chickens would get hurt. Next thing I knew Dick had him, and the way he did shake that Greaser must have made the last mentioned person wish he never had been born. It was jolly, and I do think that Dick Bowen is the boss feller, don't you?"

Ethna managed to avoid answering this question by asking where Dick had gone. Maggie replied that he had gone out on a hunt and said that he might not return for several days. A few minutes later the girls turned their faces toward Eden Vale.

As they walked along Maggie's tongue ran incessantly, but her companion was moody and silent. The merry lass was warm in her praises of Dick and his gallant action, and Ethna could not help thinking what a pity it was that the young man had not fallen in love with Maggie, who, it was plainly evident, was very much attracted by the singular youth.

Maggie thought it strange that Ethna was so silent and tried to rally her, but the attempt was a failure. Finally the settlement was reached and they parted.

As the major's daughter walked homeward she noticed a stranger who was putting up a large tent at one side of the collection of cabins.

This person had ridden into the camp a short time before, leading two heavily-laden pack-mules. Without asking any one's permission, he made himself quite at home and began to erect his tent. He was not disturbed, although some of the settlers felt inclined to ask him if he was not making himself a little too free.

By noon the stranger had his tent all up and ready for business. The settlers wondered very much what his business could be, for there was much about his baggage that seemed strange to them and he had erected one or two tables within the tent.

"Mebbe he's goin' ter start er restaurant," laughed Rufus Renan. "I dunno what else he's goin' ter do."

"Perhaps we had better ask him," observed one who was standing near.

"No," said the ex-overseer, shaking his head. "Let him alone an' we'll find out, or this coon's mighty mistaken."

They did find out and they were heartily surprised. That afternoon the stranger literally covered the side of his tent with a canvas on which was painted in glowing colors an announcement that told the entire camp that a gambling den had suddenly appeared in their midst.

The Serpent had entered Eden!

CHAPTER III. THE SERPENT STRIKES.

THE canvas on the side of the gambler's tent asserted that nothing but an honest game would be played and that any man stood an even chance of making a fortune in an hour. The sign was skillfully worded and painted and was craftily designed to insinuate any one who believed that he was a favorite with the Goddess of Fortune. At the bottom was printed:

"SQUARE SAM, Proprietor."

It seemed strange that the gambler should have come to Eden Vale, which was not a mining-camp, making it improbable that the settlers had either gold or valuables of which they could be plucked. It was also strange that the unwelcome visitor had known anything about the newly established settlement far down in the wilds of the mountainous San Juan country: and if he had known nothing about it, how came he there?

"Bet er dollah the report has got out that there's er new minin'-town here!" exclaimed Rufus Renan. "If that's so, jes' keep yer eyes open fo' er rush."

In no other way could the appearance of the gambler be accounted for satisfactorily.

When Major Lakeman learned the newcomer's business he appeared both troubled and angry for a short time, then his face cleared and he said with an air of relief:

"It is not at all probable that any of the men will have anything to do with the rascal, and when he finds that there is no business here he will have to go away. I think he will find this a very poor place to carry on his robbery business under a scarcely less milder name. But to make everything sure, I will warn every one to keep away from his tent."

But trouble that the major little dreamed of was to follow the appearance of the "Canvas Palace," as Square Sam called his tent. Humanity the world over has a strange love for gambling, although in some people the desire may be held in check or quite extinguished. But it is a brave man who can deliberately refuse to make a large sum of money on the turn of a card when it seems there is scarcely a possibility of his losing much.

Major Lakeman was careful to warn all of the men of Eden Vale to beware of the gambler, but he was quite mistaken when he felt confident that the warning would keep them all from the Canvas Palace.

Late that afternoon the Mad Mountain Prophet, as the people of the valley now called the strange old man of the mountains, was seen approaching the collection of cabins. As before, he walked without a staff and with uncovered head. As soon as he had entered the settlement he began crying:

"Woe! woe! Beware of the Mystic League of the San Juan!"

This cry reached the ears of Square Sam, who was within his tent, and for a few moments the gambler stood as if turned to stone, a look of amazement on his face. Then, snarling out a fierce imprecation, he leaped toward the opening in the tent, his right hand grasping a revolver. Again came the cry:

"Beware of the Mystic League, for already they have a spy in your midst!"

Then the gambler's eyes fell upon the strange

figure that was passing the tent and moving away toward the mountain from the side of which a blue wreath of smoke was curling skyward. In an instant Square Sam's face became white as the purest marble and he reeled back as if struck a heavy blow on the forehead. A gasping cry came from his lips and the revolver dropped from his nerveless fingers.

It was several moments before the gamester regained his composure. When he did, he leaped toward the opening of the tent and looked out. The old man was some distance away, walking steadily onward.

"Great Judas!" gasped Square Sam. "Will nothing kill that devil?"

The Prophet did not pause or look back. Wheeling, with a second imprecation, the wandering gambler grasped a loaded rifle which was near at hand, and, cocking it, knelt in the opening of the tent and brought it to his shoulder, with the muzzle pointed straight toward the back of the retreating hermit. Deliberately the man with the rifle took a careful aim, evidently with the deadly determination of putting a bullet through the white-haired individual.

"Now, curse you, *die!*" he hissed, with vindictiveness indescribable, but, just as he was about to press the trigger the huge black bird with the head of an animal came sweeping down toward the Mad Prophet and uttered an ear-splitting shriek just above the uncovered head.

"The Winged Demon!"

Square Sam gave utterance to the exclamation as he allowed the rifle to sink without being discharged. If possible, the gambler seemed more shaken than when he had first seen the old man passing his tent. He trembled in every limb and there was a look of absolute terror on his face. At the sight of the bird, Jose Costillo had evinced but little more fear than did the murderous-minded card sharp.

With a strange fascination Sam kept his eyes on the circling bird, and all the while his lips kept moving, but he uttered not a sound. Suddenly he started up and once more lifted the rifle, but after trying to hold it steady for several seconds, he lowered it again with a mingled oath and groan.

"It's no use! I am so shaken that I cannot hold the gun steady to save me. I could touch neither man nor bird, and so once more they both escape me. That black vampire is worse than the man. I would give my right hand to see the monster lying dead at my feet! But it seems to be possessed of immortality, for every attempt to kill it has proven a failure. I have almost come to believe that it is in truth a demon, and that no mortal man can destroy it."

Of course the settlers were startled by the Mad Prophet's assertion that there was a spy of the Mystic League's in their midst, but it must be confessed they looked upon the strange old man as quite insane, and did not put much confidence in his warning.

That night at dusk the gambler sat in front of his tent and sung several songs, accompanying himself with a banjo. He was a fine singer, and while his lively tunes made the echoes ring, and caused the blood to dance in the veins of those who were listening, his pathetic ones were so finely rendered that they brought tears to the eyes of nearly all who heard them. It did not seem possible that the man who could sing so touchingly of home could be a wandering sport, possibly without a home in all the wide world.

The gambler's singing did just what he intended for it to do—it induced some of the settlers to come over to his tent. Then he invited them in, and soon the place was brilliantly lighted, while sounds of voices and sounds of mirth came from the tent, which was very comfortably arranged.

An hour later word reached Major Lakeman that some of the men were gambling in Square Sam's tent. At first he could scarcely believe his informant, for he had felt sure that every one would heed his warning. But the man was sure that he was right, and, with an air of determination, the major arose, quietly announcing that he was going to investigate.

"Oh, father! do be careful and not get into trouble!" cried Ethna, with her hand on his arm.

"Trouble, child!" laughed the major. "Why should I get into trouble?"

"The stranger may be a wicked and desperate man."

"Ethna is right, Hugh," said Mrs. Lakeman, from her easy-chair. "I am sure that gambler is a dangerous man. Do be careful and not get into trouble!"

"Dangerous or not," declared the magnate of Eden Vale, "he shall discover that he cannot bring his canvas dive into this place and practice his genteel method of robbery. The men of

this town do not want him here, and to-morrow he shall move."

The major was a very determined man, slow to anger, but when he was once aroused, he had a way of carrying everything before him.

Bidding his wife and daughter not to worry about him, as he would soon return, he left the cabin and walked rapidly toward the gambler's tent, from which now came an occasional shout or burst of laughter. He did not pause an instant, but, walking straight up to the front of the tent, he drew aside the flap and stepped quickly in. The sight which greeted his eyes explained what was occurring.

There were cards and money on the table around which sat four men, including Square Sam. But, there were two black bottles on the table, as well as cards and money. Apparently the gambler was doing his best to get the little party in a hilarious condition, knowing that they could be easily fleeced.

The men looked up in a guilty manner when the major entered, and the owner of the tent arose to his feet, saying blandly:

"Ah! another to join our little party. The gentlemen do not seem inclined to do anything else, we are having a little game of poker. Come in and have a hand, sir."

Without heeding the smooth speaker, the major turned to the men who were being drawn into the sharp's trap, saying reproachfully:

"Friends, I warned you against this. Why didn't you heed what I said?"

The confused men seemed incapable of reasoning, but Square Sam instantly understood the situation, and cried:

"If you have come here to interfere with our quiet and harmless game, I give you warning that you will get into trouble. Perhaps you do not know me, sir?"

"On the contrary," said the major, gazing at the gambler in sudden surprise, "I know you very well, for now I recognize you as Dunn Midas, the coward and deserter!"

The gambler gave a great start of amazement and peered keenly into the bold speaker's face. Then he fairly shouted:

"And I know you, Major Hugh Lake. You are the man who aided in condemning me to be shot like a dog! Thus I square account!"

Then he flung up his hand, which held a revolver. A sharp, whip-like report rang out, and with a low groan, Major Lakeman fell heavily to the ground!

CHAPTER IV.

THREE TREASURE-HUNTERS.

NIGHT had settled over the mountainous region known as the San Juan country.

In the depths of a wild and picturesque canyon two men had camped. They were evidently miners, and there was a great difference in their ages, one being at least forty-five and the other not more than twenty-one.

The name of the older man was Ike Shackley, and he was a veteran of the mountains and plains, having spent nearly twenty years of his life in searching for a fortune amid the mines of the West. He had the grizzled, weather-beaten appearance of one who has been much exposed to all kinds of weather, and was at least six feet tall. He was thoroughly armed with the most improved weapons.

Despite his age, Ralph Perry, as the younger man was known, had seen much of wild life in the West, having worked on a cattle-ranch for two years and roughed it in the mountains two years more. He was a rather pleasant-looking young fellow, and it was plain that he was careful of his personal appearance in an astonishing degree for one in his situation. Like Shackley, he was thoroughly armed.

The camp-fire which the two men had built revealed the fact that there were four horses in the background, two of which had probably been used as pack-animals. Certain implements in the vicinity of the fire seemed to indicate that the two campers were miners who were probably on a prospecting trip. There was a large bundle which appeared to be a canvas tent, and there were other bundles of provisions and things which would naturally be needed on a long trip into a wild country. As they had not pitched the tent, it was plain that their present camp was but a temporary one. They would probably move on again in the morning.

With their weapons near at hand, the two adventurers were reclining on the ground in the light of the cheerful fire, smoking their after-supper pipes and discussing the situation. Evidently they had not the least idea that any one but themselves was in the immediate vicinity.

"Waal, lad," said Long Ike, as the era

Old Misery, the Man from Missouri.

miner was sometimes called, "we're gittin' er long, eh?"

"But we have not seen a sign of the ruins of which Rollins told us," asserted the younger man, who was gazing into the fire in a somewhat gloomy manner.

"Ho! ho!" chuckled Ike. "Hain't gittin' homesick be ye, lad?"

"Hardly that!" replied Ralph, with a flush; "for you know I have no home. But you know how sure you were that you could go direct to the ruins with the aid of the dying man's directions and the rude map which he gave us, yet we have failed to find them."

"You're in too much of er hurry, boy," nodded the old miner, looking grave. "I made calculations on er long trip, fer I wuzn't sure that I c'u'd go straight ter ther ruins of which he-tole us. They are down hyer in this kentry sumwhar, I am sure of that. Rollins didn't lie."

"I hope not, for if he did, we are on a wild goose chase."

"He didn't, lad, he didn't! Member he wuz dyin'?"

"I know that. I cannot conceive any object he would have in sending us astray after we had rendered him such a service. But for us, the red devils would have had his scalp, and they would have had it in less than five minutes."

"Right ye are. We happened erlong at ther las' second, but not soon ernuff ter save the p're feller's life. He had got his las' sickness an' wuz fightin' off ther imps of sin while he wuz dyin'. I reckon he was clean grit, all through."

"Yes, he was plucky, and I took him for a man who would scorn to tell a lie under ordinary circumstances, much more when he knew himself to be mortally wounded."

"He didn't lie, Ralph, boy, fer he had no oblec' in doin' so. Although we kem erlong too late ter save his life, we wuz in time ter keep his skelp frum bein' taken by ther Utes. In return he wanted ter do suthin' fer us. He said that he had no 'lations in all ther worl' that he cared er fiddlestring fer. He knew that he c'u'dn't live ter ever come back hyer an' git ther treasure, so he tole us all erbout it an' guv us her map. Thar warn't no crookedness 'bout that."

"I trust you are right, Ike. If you are, and we ever find the ruins on the flat top of the lofty mountain, our fortunes are made."

"Ef we fine ther treasure. You know Rollins said it wuz in an ole wall. I've got all ther directions hyer," tapping his forehead with one forefinger.

"Yes, I remember all that he said about where it was hidden. But, what if some one has found before us?"

Long Ike shook his head.

"Tain't likely."

"And still it may have happened. If the outlaws who were disguised as Indians did not know that the party had found the treasure and had it in their possession, why did they attack them and destroy them all with the exception of Rollins, who escaped by the skin of his teeth, as it were?"

"Did you ever hear of ther Mystic League of the San Juan, lad?"

"No, never."

"Waal, I hev. It is er gang of bloodthirsty devils, part criminals from ther States, part outlaw Mexicans an' part Injuns. It is said that they murder people jest fer ther fun of killin', an' never yet has one of ther devils been captured. Jest w'en they are in a tight corner they will vanish ez ef they wuz sperits, an' I reckon that's why it's called ther Mystic League. I reckon that that wuz ther party as wiped out ther emigrant gang what Rollins berlonged ter."

"I do not know about that, of course; but it seems strange that after the party took refuge in the ruins on top of the mountain and fought so desperately—Rollins said they must have killed five or six of the desperadoes—it does seem strange that the outlaws should have persisted in the fight simply for the sake of butchering the defenders of the ruins. I cannot help thinking that they knew something about the treasure and that explains why they were so determined. If they did know anything about it, it is probable that they would raze the ruins but they would find the treasure."

The old miner laughed.

"Reckon they'd hev quite er job ter raise the ruins ef they be wbut I think they are. Ef they are ennything like ther old ruins of er Moqui village that I once saw, it 'u'd take ther Old Boy hisself ter raise 'em. They wuz built of stone on ther top of er big flat-topped mountain or mesa. Raise 'em! Waal, I reckon it 'u'd be quite er sizable lift!"

It was now Ralph's turn to laugh.

"You misunderstood my meaning, Ike," he hastened to say. "By raze I meant razee—to tear down—destroy."

"Waal, why didn't ye say whut ye meant?" drawled Ike, good-naturedly. "This sayin' one thing an' meanin' another is mighty bad business sometimes."

For a few moments the two fortune-hunters were silent, gazing musingly into the flaring fire. Finally, the young man asked:

"Did Rollins say how the treasure came into their possession?"

"Nop, he didn't hev er chance afore he got so low he c'u'dn't talk. He did say that it wuz all in pure nuggets an' dust. It is— Hark!"

"Oh. Cherokee Bill wuz a very good man, So lovin' an' gentle an' kind! He gaffled to ther hoss of Big Knife Dan An' lett ther owner far behind. He loved that hoss in a tender way, An' so he allus kept it nigh; They caught him with ther beast one day An' hung poor William up to dry."

The canyon echoed with the song. Some one was approaching, roaring out the words as loudly as a pair of healthy lungs would permit, making much more noise than music. The treasure-hunters grasped their weapons and started to their feet.

"Hello down thar by ther fire!"

The stranger had seen them and had probably caught sight of their hasty movements. Before they could answer his hail he cried again:

"Don't be in er hurry 'bout shootin'. I'm comin', han's up an' empty."

A few seconds later the singer walked into the circle of light made by the fire. He was a rather rough-looking customer, with a bearded face and a crooked nose that had apparently been broken at some past time. He was holding his empty hands above his head, and, as he approached the fire, he stumbled and fell to the ground, nearly landing in the flames. In a moment Long Ike decided that the unknown was considerably the worse for liquor.

"Whoa, there!" grunted the fallen individual as he sat up and stared around with a silly grin on his ugly face. "Why in thunder didn't ye tell er feller zat stun wuz there? Never mine; I had ter git down shum way," he added, speaking thickly.

"Who are you?" demanded Long Ike, who could not refrain from smiling at the stranger's mishap.

"Me? Oh, I'sh Santa Fe Sim. I'sh all right, don't you mine 'bout me. Shet down, gentlemen, an' have somethin'."

With this generous invitation Santa Fe Sim, as the intoxicated individual had called himself, produced a flat quart bottle which was about half full of liquor. This he extended toward Long Ike, with the invitation to "Drink hearty, pard."

But Shackley shook his head.

"I'm much obleged, stranger, but I seldom tetch it."

And although Santa Fe Sim urged them and seemed angry at their refusals, neither of the two men would taste of the stuff in the bottle.

"Oh, well, that's all right!" asserted the newcomer, after he had taken a long pull at the bottle. "P'raps you think I hain't high-toned 'nuff fer ye ter drink wish. I want you ter unstan' I'sh er rich man, I ish. I hain't no outlaw neither. I'm shut of that kind of bishness, fer thar can't no boss kick Santa Fe Sim."

"I'm a solid old brick,
I'm a hard crowd ter kick,
I'm a rusher, I'm a growler,
I'm a crusher, I'm a howler,
Whoopdedoo!"

And after singing this improvisation, the man from Santa Fe took another drink. It was plain that he would soon be too drunk to sing or talk.

"Yesh, shir," asserted the man with the bottle, wiping his lips with the back of his hand and staring into the fire with owlish gravity, "I'm boun' ter be a rich man. I know whar there's er heap of yeller, I do, and it's hid on ther top of er high mountian. Hoop! I heerd ther bosh shay they never foun' it, but he wash goin' back ter look fer it. Dern him! He kicked Santa Fe Sim, an' you bets yer life he don' git ther treasure! I'm goin' ter git thar fu'st."

Long Ike and Ralph exchanged startled glances. Could it be that the drunken fellow was speaking of the very treasure that they were in search of in that wild region? Something told them that he was.

"What are you sayin', pard?" asked Shackley. "I didn't jest ketch yer meanin'."

"Oh ye didn' jesh kesh mer meanin', hey?"

repeated the fellow, speaking thicker than before and darting a suspicious glance at the veteran miner. "Waal, I don't chaw my cud twiset. Reckon you'd like ter git yer han's on that treasure, eh? Wal, ye won't, I'sh goin' ter tell ye that. I know my bishness ef I hash bin drinkin'. Can't pump Shanta Fe Sim, pard."

Then he took another drink and deliberately lay down beside the fire, mumbling thickly:

"Goo' ni', pard. Don' bozer 'bout me. I'sh all ri'. Goo' ni'."

Two minutes later he was snoring lustily.

"Waal, I'll be hanged!" drawled Long Ike, as he arose and stood over the inebriated stranger.

"What do you think of it?" asked Ralph.

"I think that this galoot's on ther same trail that we are," was the reply. "He come mighty nigh givin' ther hull thing erway. I caught ernough ter tell that he has belonged ter some kind of a gang as wuz goin' ter hunt fer ther treasure."

"Outlaws do you think?"

"P'raps. This may be some trick."

The two moved away a short distance, but remained where they could watch the man by the fire. Then they discussed the situation in low tones, finally deciding that it would be best for them to guard the camp that night. Shackley decided to take the first half of the watch, and soon Ralph was sleeping soundly while the old miner sat on a large rock industriously chewing tobacco and watching the dancing fire. His rifle was near at hand, ready for use.

Long Ike found a comfortable chance to lean back and before long he sunk into a delightful drowse. In a short time he was sleeping soundly.

Just how long he slept or what awoke him the miner never knew, but suddenly he found himself standing on his feet and gazing toward the fire. Then he made a startling discovery.

Santa Fe Sim was gone!

CHAPTER V.

OLD MISERY AND SOLOMON.

LONG Ike Shackley was amazed at the discovery that their visitor was nowhere to be seen. He had no means of telling how long he had slept, but he did not believe it was very long. At the same time he knew that if Santa Fe Sim had been one-half as drunk as he pretended to be when he lay down by the fire he would not have awakened for several hours. Ike instantly decided that he had been tricked and he realized that they might be in deadly danger at that moment.

"I will 'rouse ther lad an' we'll slope, too, mighty sudden."

Barely had the miner formed this determination when the clear, whip-like crack of a rifle at a considerable distance came to his ears followed the next instant by a faint cry of mortal agony.

"What was that?" asked Ralph, in a low tone, starting up and grasping his rifle, which he had kept close at hand.

"Ther Ole Nick hes bruck loose!" hissed Shackley, springing forward and giving the remaining brands of the fire a kick which sent them flying, in more than a dozen directions.

"We must skip right peert, lad!"

In an instant the young man was on his feet, seeming to grasp the situation with remarkable swiftness.

"Now fer ther bosses," came in a hoarse whisper from the long miner's lips.

Their motions were rapid, but every move counted. They first saw that their saddle-horses were ready for service; then they made the pack-animals ready. All this could not be done in a minute, but it was done in an incredibly short space of time. Ike had been surprised to find all of the animals in their places, but a second thought had told him that the crafty man from Santa Fe had not touched them for fear of arousing the sleepers. He probably counted on getting back before the guard awoke and discovered his absence, and Ike was in great fear lest he should return before they could get away. Not that the old miner was afraid of any one man, but he knew well enough that Santa Fe Sim would not be alone when he returned.

"Where is our visitor?"

Ralph could not refrain from asking the question, but his companion only replied:

"You tell!"

That was enough. Young Perry understood it as well as if Ike had explained in a more elaborate manner. He also knew that the veteran was silently cursing himself for his stupidity in being duped in such a way and falling asleep long enough for the skillful personator of a drunken man to leave the camp.

"All ready," came softly from the tall man's lips. "We'll lead 'em fer er piece an' go ez still ez we kin. Come."

They started down the canyon away from the point from which had come the shot and the cry. They moved as silently as they could, but the iron-shod hoofs of the horses made considerable noise. This fact seemed to trouble Shackley, for he swore softly beneath his breath once or twice, and when they had gone quite a distance, he gave the word to mount.

Barely were they settled in the saddle when a chorus of voices, joined in a wild yell of baffled rage and disgust, came down the canyon. Long Ike chuckled.

"They hev reached ther spot whar we uester wuz," he observed. "An' now they'll be comin' this way, hotter'n bald-headed ole he hornets. Let's git."

And suiting the action to the word, they put spurs to the horses and galloped away with the pack-animals following close behind. There was no longer any need of moving silently, so Ralph ventured to ask:

"What do you make of it, Ike? From whom are we fleeing?"

"Injuns, lad, Injuns! Navajoes or 'Paches, I dunno which, but I reckon it's Navajoes. They are ther most apt ter be in these parts."

"Will we get away without a fight?"

"P'raps so, p'raps not, no tellin'. But I am going ter say that ther chances are that we shall. Tain't likely they'll ketch us arter we git out of ther canyon. Thar w'u'dn't be no chance a tall fer them ter ketch us ef we didn't hev no pack-annymiles."

"Do you think they are mounted?"

"Prob'ly, ef they are 'Paches."

Onward down the canyon dashed the two adventurers, Shackley leading the way. They were in imminent danger of being hurled from their horses, as the way was very rough and it was quite dark in the depths of the canyon where the moonlight did not penetrate, for the moon was shining faintly through the fleecy clouds which covered the sky. But Long Ike seemed to have the eyes of an owl, for he picked out the smoothest road without the least hesitation, and fortunately no accident befell them.

Thirty minutes later they turned into a narrow side canyon that was literally as crooked as a ram's horn. There they were forced to travel much more slowly, for it was much darker than in the main canyon. Still they did not pause, although Long Ike confessed that he had not the least idea where the gorge would take them.

"I reckon it will come out somewhar," he said; "an' so, we'll take our chances. Most ennythin's better nor runnin' erg'in' er gang of bloody-minded red varmints sech er night ez this."

There was no disputing the wisdom of his words, and so they kept on, hoping to come out all right somewhere.

"It seems to me like this gorge or ravine has twisted till we are going back parallel with the one that we left," observed the young treasure-hunter.

"I cal'late you're right, lad," acknowledged the miner. "We are goin' back, but that's all ther better."

Finally, they halted.

"Thar," said Ike, "I'm thinkin' that we're 'bout oppersite ther place whar we camped an' not more'n hafe er mile frum it ef we count ther distance right straight through ther solid wall of rock that lays atween ther two canyons. This un's er leetle higher than ther other an' not nigh so large, though ther wuzn't so very big. I cal'late this leads out somewhar afore long."

"Do you think of stopping here for the rest of the night?"

"I dunno. Ther night hain't more'n hafe gone, that is, not much more. We'll hev ter stop somewhar, though I don't reckon we'll build enny fire. Ther winds that sweep through these year reveens are ernuff ter cut ter ther bone, but we'll hev ter wrop in our blankets an' shiver it out. Better be hafe froze then be bald-headed jest whar yer skelp orter be, eh, lad?"

"That is the way I look at it. We came mighty near losing our topknots."

"Now ye're shoutin'. I didn't snooze er great while, fer ther fire hadn't burned clean out by enny means. I'm er thinkin' that ther gent from Santy Fe hadn't bin gone more'n no time afore I woke an' diskivered it. He wuz han' an glove with ther red varmints who wuz prob'ly layin' er short distance off waitin' fer him ter report."

"But what do you make of that shot and cry?"

"I dunno jest w'at ter make of it. If 'tadn't been fer ther yell that tole us that er gang of red varmints hed foun' our camp an' wuz mighty dissip'nted, I might 'a' thort that it wuz our visitor as had run inter ther imps of sin an' salted one. But ther yell tole me that ther reds wuz s'pectin' ter fine us right whar we wuz camped."

"And too, our visitor did not have a rifle with him."

"Kirect. So it stan's ter reason that some other gentleman interjuiced ther red devils ter a lead pill."

"He! he! he! Reckon I'm ther gentleman ye're referrin' ter, pard. I permitted Perforator ter run a tunnel in ther carcass o' one o' ther copper-completed skunks, and from yer tork I'm thinkin' you must 'a' heard his exclamitory interjeckulation o' s'prise. He squealed right out in high G or thereabouts, an' then he must 'a' felt powerful tired, fer he laid down ter rest. Hello! Don't shoot! Ez ther 'coon said ter Davy Crockett, 'I'll come down.'"

Then a dark figure slid down over the sloping bank at their left, landing just in front of the horses.

"Hyer I be, pard, right side up an' smilin'."

"Who are you?" demanded Ike.

"Ole Misery, at yer service, general tramp, vagabond, Injun-hater an' football o' Miss Fortune. P'raps you don't know ther ancient damsel o' which I speak, but I do, havin' bin interjuiced ter her at an early period o' my earthly career from ther cradle ter ther Shinin' Shore. She kicked me out o' ther just-mentioned cradle, an' hes bin kickin' me ever since. Ez I'm over sixty year old, I'm pritty used ter her kickin', an' I reckon I kin stan' it tell I am planted whar ther dais'es grow ef she kin. I'm er jolly hombly little ole rip, fer all o' ther bad luck I've allus had. Kem frum Mizzury; that's why I'm called Ole Misery. Now, who be you fellers?"

With a few words, Shackley explained that they were miners, and introduced himself and his companion by their names. Old Misery, who in the darkness appeared to be a little round-shouldered old fellow, shook their hands warmly, declaring:

"It duz me good ter git holt o' ther fins o' hones' men once more. Most er feller kin see in this part o' ther kentry's red-skins or Greasers, an' one's bad ez ther other."

"Hello!" exclaimed Ralph, suddenly cocking his rifle. "What is that up there?"

"Hey! don't shoot!" cried Old Misery, quickly. "Thet's Solomon."

"Solomon who? Why doesn't he come down?"

"Solomon," said the old man, speaking to the dimly discerned figure on the bank above, "why don't ye come down?"

"Bow-wow!"

It was the low bark of a dog, and the next moment the animal came scrambling down the bank.

"Gentlemen," observed the Man from Missouri, "this year's Solomon, my dawg. I call him Solomon because he's so wise. He hates Injuns an' Greasers ez bad ez I do, an' he's 'sisted me in sendin' more'n one red varmint ter ther happy huntin'-groun's. Oh, he's er great dawg!"

With this brief encomium the old man turned from the dog and asked:

"Which way wuz ye movin', pard?"

"Any way ter git out of this vicinity," was Long Ike's reply.

"All right; ef you'll foller me, I'll take ye out o' this year reeven. Arter I drapped ther red varmint over in ther other canyon, an' saw that ther rest o' his 'lation did not lift ther hair o' ther two pale-faces o' which er dirty white skunk o' er renegade wuz tellin' them, w'en I let Perforator whang. I an' Solomon made our way over ther ridge atwixt ther gorges, fer I hev bin through this one an' know ther lay o' ther lan'. I knew jest whar I c'u'd git from one to ther other."

"Then ye heerd er white man tellin' ther reds that ther wuz others nigh?" asked Ike, with interest.

"Yep. Said that w'u'dn't be no trouble in liftin' their hair."

"Ther cursed whelp!" growled the prospector. "I'd like ter lay my han's on him."

Then he told Old Misery how they had been deceived by the fellow who had pretended to be intoxicated. After this they moved on again, Old Misery and Solomon leading the way. It was not long before they reached the opening to the ravine where it debouched upon an open plain, which could be dimly seen in the hazy moonlight.

Suddenly Solomon gave utterance to a low growl, and the dog's master cautioned them to

listen. They did so, and plainly heard the approaching thud of a horse's hoofs, the animal apparently traveling at a gallop.

"Down, Solomon!" commanded the Man from Missouri. "Lay back in ther shadders, pard!"

And with these warnings he cocked the long rifle which he carried.

Nearer and nearer came the galloping animal, till at length a horse and rider were dimly seen. Swiftly the figures came forward till they were opposite the spot where the two friends were crouching in the shadows, then Ralph exclaimed, in amazement:

"Great King! a girl!"

The moonlight breaking from behind a thin cloud had showed him that it was a female figure on the back of the flying horse. As she turned her head to cast a look over her shoulder, they saw that she was white. At the same instant, Old Misery exclaimed, in a guarded tone:

"Hyer comes another!"

It was true. Some distance in the rear came another horse bearing a rider, who was evidently in pursuit of the flying girl. The second rider was a man, and as he urged his horse to the utmost of the animal's capacity, he shouted:

"Stop, senorita, stop! Escape you can not. My prisoner you must be. You will be killed you do not stop!"

The flying female made no reply, but her hand rose and fell sharply on the haunch of her horse, and pursued and pursuer swept onward to be hidden by the hazy shadows which hung over the plain.

CHAPTER VI.

COSTELLO MAKES A DESPERATE MOVE.

CRIES of horror came from the three men who witnessed the gambler's mad act as he deliberately shot down Major Hugh Lakeman within the tent called the Canvas Palace. They were amazed and paralyzed by the swiftness with which the desperado had accomplished his terrible purpose, and by the magnitude of the sudden tragedy which they had witnessed.

For a few moments after the shot which had dropped the magnate of Eden Vale in a heap on the ground, a dead silence rested on all, the witnesses of the tragedy glaring at the man who, with a fiendish look of triumph on his face, stood with his still smoking revolver grasped in his hand.

Then with a suddenness such as had characterized his last act, Square Sam threw up his revolver once more and dashed the muzzle through the globe of a light that was swinging within reach of his arm. At the same instant he kicked over another table on which sat a lamp, plunging the interior of the tent into darkness.

But, that was not all the desperate wretch did. With a great surge he sent the other table against the three men who had been gambling with him, and all were hurled to the ground with the table on top of them.

When they extricated themselves from the mass into which the murderous gambler had cast them and dashed out of the tent, they were just in time to see a dark figure vanish in the gloom between two of the cottages. It would be folly to fire toward the spot where the man was last seen, but one of the men drew a revolver and emptied every chamber in swift succession, firing into the air. As a result, they were soon surrounded by a group of excited people, who eagerly demanded to know the cause of the commotion.

Great was the rage and sorrow of the settlers when they learned what had taken place, and many were the maledictions sent after the vanished villain. But, that was not all. Without the loss of any time, more than one-half of the men of Eden Vale began searching for the wretch. If caught, his punishment would be swift and sure.

Lights were brought, and some of the men entered the tent where the respected and unfortunate major was lying. Others, including many of the women, crowded forward to get a look at the body.

"This will be a terrible blow for his wife, and poor Miss Ethna," said one of the men, bending over to examine the fallen man's wound.

At that moment a low moan came from the supposed dead man's lips; he stirred a little, then suddenly sat up.

"What has happened?"

It was the major himself who asked the question, and more than one uttered a fervent "Thank God!" as they saw that the wounded man was far from being dead. His wound, which was on the head, was quickly examined by one of the men who had had some experience,

in such matters, and a great breath of relief came from nearly all who heard him when he declared that it was not necessarily serious. It was soon washed and dressed, and then the major insisted on walking home, which he did with assistance.

The following morning the wounded man was reported to be as well as could be expected under the circumstances, and the man who had dressed his wound and who was called "Doc" in the settlement asserted that he would come round all right if the wound did not affect his brain. This was great consolation for those who heard it, although they knew that the speaker had very little practical surgical science.

As for Square Sam, he escaped on one of his own horses, leaving the other animals and the tent and fixtures. He never returned to claim anything, and the parties of indignant men who searched for him for three days after his dastardly attempt on the major's life were forced to give up the hunt with the conclusion that he had passed safely beyond their reach.

The very day that the major ventured out of the house for the first time after his nearly fatal meeting with Duncan Midas, as he had called the gambler, Maggie Renan rode up to the cottage and asked for Ethna. She was informed that the one she sought had gone for a gallop down the river, mounted on her favorite pony, having left the cottage not more than thirty minutes before.

"I will overtake her," cried the light-hearted maiden, as she dashed away in the direction Ethna had taken.

But Maggie was not in quite as good spirits as usual. Of course she would not have confessed that the unaccountable absence of Dick Bowen from the settlement had anything to do with her feelings, but—well, never mind. True it was that Dick had not been seen in Eden Vale since he met with such a disappointment beside the river and afterward gave Jose Costillo such a deserved shaking. But Maggie knew nothing of what had happened before Dick rescued her from the Spaniard, for Ethna had seen fit to keep it all from her little friend.

Despite the fact that the midday sun was pouring its rays down into the valley, there was sufficient breeze to make it delightful riding, and Maggie's cheeks got a charming color as she dashed swiftly along, making her look unusually pretty. She rode on for some time, feeling sure that she must soon overtake her friend, and uttering an exclamation of disappointment when each new continuation of the valley came in sight and still Ethna was not to be seen.

But as Maggie rode onward she fell to thinking of the absent Dick, and without knowing it, she allowed her horse to gradually settle into a walk. She also began to express her thoughts aloud.

"I wonder where he can be—"

"Buenos dias, señorita. Do you speak of Jose?"

She gave a start and exclamation of surprise and dismay. Directly in her path, mounted on a tough little Indian pony, sat Costillo the Spaniard, an evil smile of triumph on his dark face. He had removed his sombrero and was bowing in a mocking manner. Maggie was forced to draw rein, for he was directly in her way.

"I am much pleased to see the beautiful señorita," asserted the evil-appearing fellow. "The surprise is very great."

"That's a fact," admitted Maggie. "It is altogether too great. I had a deal rather have seen the Old Nick himself."

Costillo showed his teeth.

"You are not complimentary. A point is to your tongue. But, words do not hurt Jose."

"If they did I would hurl my whole vocabulary at you," snapped the little spitfire. "As it is, I will ask you to get out of my way and let me go on."

"You are in a hurry?"

"Yes, I am. Will you get out of the way?"

"You have too much baste," laughed the Spaniard, as he grasped the bridle of her pony and sprung from his own animal. "You can go on, but you shall go with Jose Costillo."

He sprang forward to seize her and she struck at him with her riding-whip, putting all of her strength into the blow. His hand darted up and caught the descending whip, and although it must have hurt as it fell upon his hand, he held fast and wrenched it from her grasp, laughing triumphantly:

"Little fire bird, but Costillo will tame her, ha! ha! She is mine!"

Then he dragged her from the saddle, taking care that her pony was not frightened, and, despite her struggles and screams, the ruffian handled her almost as easily as he had been

handled by Dick Bowen. Very deftly he tied her hands together and then swung her into the saddle and fastened her there. He seemed to have had everything ready for the occasion, and Maggie could not help thinking that he had been laying in wait for her. Perhaps Ethna had also fallen into the dastard's hands!

"You are there, little one," said the Spaniard, regarding her with considerable satisfaction. "Very beautiful you are, and you are all mine."

Maggie's face was white with rage.

"You coward!" she said, in a low tone that was more intense than a shriek would have been.

"You shall pay for this. Dick Bowen will call you to an account."

"Diavolo Americano!" snarled Jose. "I will yet kill him!"

When he had arranged it so that he could lead the girl's pony, he mounted his own animal and they started. Maggie felt that it was useless to say anything to the treacherous villain, yet she could not refrain from "giving him a piece of her mind," which she proceeded to do. It produced very little impression on the dark-faced wretch, who only smiled but made no reply.

As soon as possible Costillo left the valley and struck into the mountains. It was plain that he had some fear of being seen, although it was not probable that they would come upon any one from Eden Vale unless it was Ethna.

Maggie's hands were confined by rawhide strips, and the plucky girl determined to gnaw them off when her captor was not looking. This she tried to do, but found that very little impression was made on the tough thongs. Still she persisted, but after a time the Spaniard halted and examined the lashings. He laughed shortly when he saw the work of her teeth, and for all of her attempt to prevent him, he made her hands additionally secure, and neither threats nor entreaties availed to induce him to loosen the cutting bonds or release her hands entirely.

"The bird would like to fly away," he smiled, in his hateful, evil way. "Oh, no, she can not! She belongs to Jose."

"Dog!" cried Maggie. "Do you think you will escape punishment for this outrage? My father will have your life!"

"Not at all will he ever know what has become of you," her captor declared coolly. "He will no more see you at all."

But Maggie did not believe that. She was sure she would get clear of the Spaniard's hands in some way.

The afternoon passed and night was at hand. They had pushed far into the mountains.

Suddenly Costillo gave a gasp of horror and drew in his pony with such force that the startled beast reared on its haunches.

Directly in their path not more than ten rods away lay the body of a dead man, and perched on the corpse was the huge black bird of the mountains—the Winged Demon!

"The Black Vampire!" groaned the fear-stricken wretch. "See! he has been sucking the blood of the dead!"

The black bird saw them and lifted its beast-like head to glare at them a moment with a pair of fierce, fiery eyes that seemed to pierce them through and chain them motionless with horror. Then, uttering a harsh, snarling cry that chilled their blood, it spread its wings and rose from its ghastly banquet!

CHAPTER VII.

EVENTS OF THE NIGHT.

The face of the Spaniard was as white as that of the dead man lying in their path, as he watched the huge black bird fly slowly away, the lazy motion of its wide-spreading wings seeming to indicate that it was gorged to repletion by its draught of human blood. The frightened wretch did not lower his eyes till the black monster was lost in the dark shadows which were gathering over the mountains.

Although Maggie was an unusually brave girl, she had been scarcely less terrified than was her captor at sight of the mysterious bird of the mountains, for she had heard blood-chilling stories of the fear-inspiring creature with the wings of a South American condor and the seeming head of a puma. Since the monster's first appearance in Eden Vale circling above the head of the Mad Prophet of the Mountains numberless stories of the huge bird had found circulation among the settlers. It is true that Jose Costillo had started many of the strange and improbable tales, and it is but reasonable to presume that the imagination of the settlers was responsible for many more.

When the bird had disappeared the Spaniard

drew a great breath of relief and turned to the girl, saying:

"The saints have preserved us; the Demon of the Air is gone," he exclaimed.

"The saints!" laughed Maggie, regaining the use of her tongue. "Ha! ha! ha! That's too good! As if the saints would do such a wretch as you a favor!"

"How can you laugh?" asked Jose, in wonder. "Great peril we have been in. You are so strange!"

Maggie gave her head a toss.

"Stuff!" she sneered. "Who is afraid of a big black bird! You are a coward, Costillo."

Jose shook his head.

"You are young, you do not know. That creature is to be feared more than I can tell. It has the body and wings of a big bird, but carries the head of a beast and uses the voice of a man. Whether it be bird, beast or man, or part of them all, no one can say. It flies through the air, it drinks the blood of the newly dead, it speaks like a person with the language of the *Americano*."

"Now that's a little too steep!" asserted the unbelieving maiden. "Do you mean to say that that big crow can talk?"

"It can; once I heard it."

Maggie gave a groan of incredulity.

"Where did you learn to fib?" she asked. "You are a finished expert in the art of prevarication. And the idea of the saints having anything to do with such an unblushing liar—oh, my!"

"You do not believe, señorita, but the truth I speak. Have you heard of the Mystic League? Yes? Well, tell you something I will. Once far away on the top of a high flat-topped mountain the League slay many people who have taken refuge there. They were *Americanos*. From the body of one of the dead rose the Winged Demon, it never before being seen in all this country. From that time the bird follow the League while they be in this part of the country, and the ones who slew the people on the mountain die, die, die, and the Black Vampire suck their blood. Oh, terrible, terrible it was!"

Something in the Spaniard's words impressed the listener, despite her unbelief, for it did seem that he thought himself telling the truth. Almost involuntarily, Maggie asked:

"What did the bird say when you heard it speak?"

"Ah, you begin to believe! I remember not what it said, I was too terrified. But many others heard it, and as they were filled with fear, the old man they were about to slay escaped from their hands—the same one who came to the valley and have his fire on the mountain."

"It's all bosh! You imagined that the creature spoke, for it is plain that you was one of the party who was about to kill the old man, and very naturally you would feel guilty and fearful."

At this Jose seemed angry, and said that they would move on again. Maggie asked if he was not going to see what had happened to the dead man lying in their path, but he shook his head.

"Touch him I will not. I know his face. He is one of the League that slew the people on the flat-topped mountain amid the ruins of the old pueblo. The Winged Demon has done its work at last. We will leave him there."

Costillo was careful to make quite a detour, so that he might pass the corpse as far away as possible, and then they rode on into the mountain wilds once more.

Night came down, but the Spaniard made no halt. On they went through the dark and dismal canyons with the frowning walls occasionally seen on either hand. The clatter of the animal's iron-shod hoofs awoke a thousand echoes, which were at times quite startling in their distinctness, making it seem that a troupe of horses were passing through the narrow gorges instead of two. Occasionally an icy draught would strike them, giving them a cold chill.

Finally Maggie, who was nearly exhausted and ready to sink, began to beg her captor to stop long enough for them to rest. This Costillo consented to do, and when a spot that suited him was reached, they halted.

It is impossible to imagine the relief of the girl when she was freed from the galling rawhide straps that had confined her in one position for so long a time. At first her limbs were so numb that she could not stand, and Costillo uttered an exclamation of dismay when he saw her sink in a heap as soon as her feet touched the ground. He sprung to her side, probably thinking that she had fainted, but he was undeceived when she cried sharply:

"Get out of the way! Don't touch me!"

"Ah!" came from his lips in a breath of relief. "The beautiful *senorita* is all right."

"Yes the beau-u-tiful *senorita* is all right," mocked the girl, whose spirit was unbroken. "And if she was all wrong, she would not want you round her. Now I've got my hands free, you just keep at a proper distance or I'll fetch you a smash on your beau-u-tiful proboscis."

Rather vigorous talk for a young lady in Maggie's position. Jose made no reply, but led the horses away a short distance to a spot where they could obtain a scant amount of feed, first giving them a drink from a basin hollowed in the rock by a little stream of water that came tumbling down over a perpendicular wall. Maggie had arisen to her feet when he returned, but he had felt sure that she would make no attempt to escape on foot into the darkness. Such an act would be the height of folly, as she would be sure to perish from hunger or be devoured by wild animals if she succeeded in getting away. At least, that was what Costillo told her.

Once more it became evident that the Spaniard had provided for such a condition of things, for he produced a small amount of hard-tack and jerked beef which he divided with his captive. With a tin dipper he caught some water from the falling stream, and they made quite a satisfactory meal under the circumstances. Costillo had built a small fire and its warmth was quite pleasant to the chilled girl.

Finally, Maggie fell asleep close beside the fire, and, without awakening her, her captor tied his *riata* around one of her ankles and made it fast to his own wrist. He reasoned that if she awoke and found him sleeping, she would attempt to steal away without noticing the band that held them together. If she did so, he would certainly be aroused. He was in the habit of sleeping by little brief "cat naps," and he felt confident that his captive could not escape during the short spaces of time that he was slumbering. Adding more fuel to the fire, he lay down and was soon dozing in a half-conscious way, from which he would occasionally rouse up quite awake and put one or two sticks more of the dead wood that he had gathered, on the sinking flames.

Thus the night wore on. The moon came up, but the sky was overcast by hazy clouds. The Spaniard chuckled, for he saw that his fair captive was sleeping soundly, evidently quite exhausted.

"Need not fear for her!" was his thought, as he piled an unusual amount of wood upon the fire and sunk back to obtain a more refreshing nap.

But just there was where he made a mistake. Nothing aroused him till he heard a sudden clatter of hoofs receding into the night at a swift pace. He started up and looked toward the spot where Maggie had been sleeping. The girl was gone!

What a string of Spanish execrations came from the deluded rascal's lips as he dashed toward the spot where the horses had been! To his intense relief he found his own pony where he had left it, though the girl's was gone! As for Maggie, she had made a big mistake in not taking Costillo's horse as well as her own, for then the wretch would not have been able to follow her. But in her excitement and eagerness to escape she had not thought of that.

Soon her late captor came in hot pursuit, crying for her to stop. She heeded him not save to urge her pony on the faster at imminent danger of getting it off its feet and being hurled headlong. It was a mad race away through the night.

For nearly an hour the race continued before Maggie's foam-flecked animal carried her out of the gulches and ravines upon what seemed to be an open plain, but was in reality, as daylight would have shown, a large tract of bottom-land bordering a river.

Glancing over her shoulder the fleeing girl saw that her hated foe was gaining, showing that the "staying" qualities of the tough little Indian pony which he bestrode were superior to those of her own animal. Several times he called for her to stop, but she still urged her pony on, wildly hoping to evade him in some way.

At length, she turned into the shadows between two large hills. Her horse was breathing heavily and she saw that it was nearly exhausted. But she would not give up yet.

Suddenly the animal stumbled and she was urged over its head to strike the ground and lay as still as if killed by the unexpected accident. Relieved of its burden, the animal made a fresh spurt and went tearing along through the gloom of the valley, while, in hot pursuit, the Spaniard dashed past the silent figure on the

ground, which he failed to notice, and galloped on after the riderless horse.

But, brave little Maggie was not killed. She was simply stunned, not a bone of her body being broken, as good fortune had it. How long she remained unconscious she could not tell, but finally she opened her eyes and gazed around in the semi-darkness. As she did so, a gasp of fear came from her lips, for she dimly discerned the body of an animal that was slowly creeping through the gloom toward the spot where she lay. She tried to cry out, but found that her tongue seemed paralyzed and she could not utter a sound.

Nearer and nearer crept the animal, its gleaming eyes seeming to be fixed on her face. She could hear it snuff the air as if it had scented a tempting feast. Nearer, nearer, till she could feel its hot breath on her cheek. In another moment it would seize her!

The thought seemed to loosen her tongue, and she hoarsely gasped:

"Get out, you beast!"

The effect of her command was surprising. The animal squatted on its haunches, lifted its nose in the air, and sent a long, mournful howl quavering through the night.

It was a dog!

CHAPTER VIII.

THE BIRD OF DARKNESS.

LITTLE did Ethna Lakeman think how far she had rode from Eden Vale. She had urged her horse on and on, having turned from the river into the mountain ravines, for which reason she was not overtaken by Maggie Renan, who had expected to find her riding beside the river. Ethna's thoughts were of the gallant young fellow who had called himself Mountain Frank, and who had promised at parting that she should see him again. She had told him the general destination of the train, and he had delighted her by saying that he too was bound for the San Juan country, although he must first go to Denver on business. She wondered if it was not time for him to make his appearance in that region, and if he should come there, how would he know just where to find the emigrants? Although Ethna had seen very little of the bright young ranger, she was plainly in love with him.

As she rode along she also thought of the singular disappearance of Dick Bowen from the settlement, and she was not a little troubled by the fact that he had not returned since the day that his hopes had been so crushed, and he had given Costillo, the Spaniard, such a deserved shaking. She feared that she had been too harsh with the uneducated youth, and blamed herself in a measure for his self-enforced exile from Eden Vale. She knew well enough that her little friend Maggie was more than half in love with Dick, and she thought how much better it would have been for them all if the young man had possessed similar feelings for the bewitching romp.

With her mind occupied by such thoughts as these, she allowed her horse to turn whichever way he would, little heeding the fact that he was carrying her further and further from the settlement, and deeper and deeper into the mountain passes. She had never been lost amid the mountains, and knew little of the terrors of such a position.

Finally she looked up with a start and perceived for the first time that the afternoon was well advanced. She at once decided that she must turn back toward home, and this she proceeded to do as she supposed. The country was strange to her, but she believed that she could find her way back with little trouble. She little knew how far she had wandered from the river.

An hour of steady riding followed and at the end of that time she was perplexed and alarmed, for still the country seemed strange and she had not come to the river.

"But I must reach it soon," she muttered, looking around. "On, Dan, old fellow; we will come out all right."

But she was not so sure of that even then. She was bewildered and uncertain as to the points of the compass. She could not believe that she had come through the canyons and defiles that she was passing through. Everything looked strange around her and gradually she felt that vague yet terribly unpleasant sensation that comes creeping over a person when they begin to understand that they are lost. At the same time she was angry with herself to think that she should be so careless. It mortified her, and she resolved that if she reached Eden Vale before dark not a soul should know of her unpleasant adventure.

But Ethna was destined not to see Eden Vale that night. When she was fully convinced that

she was really lost, she gave Dan his head, hoping that he would find his way back to the river. But as fortune had it, he turned in directly the opposite direction and carried the poor girl deeper and deeper into the mountain wilds.

The sun had long ago disappeared behind the western mountains and in the depths of the ravines the shadows were beginning to assemble and lurk in all manner of nooks and crannies like so many robbers or assassins. Ethna looked around in helpless dismay and a low cry came from her heart:

"God help me, I am lost! I shall have to pass the night in the mountains!"

She did not dream of anything worse, for she felt that when she did not return to the settlement her father would organize a party of searchers and send them after her. Of course they would find her.

To make her trials still greater, Dan suddenly went lame. Ethna was a practical horsewoman and well versed in most matters pertaining to horses, so she at once dismounted to see if she could discover ere it was too dark what made Dan limp. Stooping, she grasped his right fore foot and told him to lift it. Just then she heard a swishing sound over her head followed by a shrill shriek, and with a snort of terror Dan broke away and went plunging along the ravine unheeding her cries till he was swallowed up by the gloom.

The huge black bird that Costillo called the Winged Demon was responsible for the horse's fright. It had swept along less than twenty feet over their heads uttering its peculiar piercing cry. With a feeling of indescribable despair Ethna saw her horse disappear and watched the demon bird till that too had vanished in the settling shadows.

"Now Heaven help me!" she said, in a low, hoarse tone. "I am alone and afoot amid the mountains. What shall I do?"

Finally, she decided to follow on after the horse, hoping that it had stopped not very far away. If she had known it, at that very moment Maggie Renan was not far away, but was a captive in the hands of the villainous Spaniard. The monster bird, after arising from the corpse on which Maggie and her captor saw it perched, had flown directly along till it passed over Ethna and her horse which it frightened with its cry.

Onward hurried the poor girl, vainly straining her eyes to catch a glimpse of the form of her pet horse standing in the dusky gloom awaiting for her to come up. Once or twice she was sure that she could see him, but when she started forward at a run, she was disappointed to discover that it was nothing but a huge boulder. Once she called his name, but the mocking echoes flung back the cry in a tantalizing way. At length she was ready to drop upon the ground in despair.

And that was just what she finally did. When she could go no further, she sunk down in the darkness and burst into tears. It was indeed a very distressing situation for a girl of eighteen.

After indulging in a "good long cry," she knelt in the darkness and uttered a brief prayer to the All-wise Being who notes even the sparrow's fall. Then, she crept to where a huge boulder would shelter her from the cold blasts that swept through the cut, and after a time she fell asleep from pure exhaustion.

For many hours she slept peacefully beside the great boulder, dreaming pleasant things for all of her recent experiences and her position at that time. But, she was to awaken to a horror greater than the worst nightmare.

Even in her pleasant dreams she seemed to hear a horrible croaking sound, but she was awakened by feeling a great weight settle on her body. At first she knew not where she was and she lay quite still trying to think what had happened. Soon she remembered it all. The heavy weight was still on her body and in the darkness or semi-gloom she could distinguish a huge black form above her. A moment later she heard the harsh, croaking sound that had broken her dream, and it came from the creature that had settled upon her!

The girl's horror was so great that she could not move a muscle. What was it? Some animal that had found her there and would devour her? She felt that it must be. She strained her eyes to see if she could tell just what it was, and then she was aware of two burning, coal-like orbs that seemed to be fastened upon her own. She could not remove her eyes from the red balls of fire. They fascinated her as the eyes of a serpent fascinates the victim it is about to destroy. A terrible chilling horror held her spell-bound.

Again that harsh croaking, low but so terrible. It was the bird of evil omen!

She had heard the stories of the Vampire which were rife at Eden Vale, and she had not a doubt but that it was waiting for her to die that it might suck her blood. What a horrible thought!

Then she uttered a wild cry. An echoing cry, evidently of amazement, came from the bird, and instantly its huge wings lifted it into the air. Shrieking like a fiend of the night it flew away, away till its cries grew fainter and fainter and died out in the distance.

Breathing a prayer of gratitude, the girl arose and ran swiftly away. On, on she hurried, to get as far from the terrible spot as possible.

How the rest of that night passed she could never tell, but morning came at last, and with tears of joy Ethna greeted the blessed light of day. Stretching her hands toward the gold-tinted east, she relieved her feelings with a long, low cry.

At that instant a low, fierce growl came to her ears, and, whirling swiftly, she gave a gasp of fear as she saw on a little eminence a large puma, or American lion, crouching as if about to spring upon her!

CHAPTER IX.

MOUNTAIN FRANK APPEARS.

FROM one danger to another! From one horrible position to another in no way less terrible! It seemed that fate was against the fair girl and that her prayers were unavailing. One glance at the crouching beast with gleaming teeth and slow moving tail showed that it was about to make the fatal leap. Had Ethna escaped the dangers of the night to provide a morning feast for the mountain lion?

For all of her peril, she did not lose her strength and sink to the ground in deadly fear. Instead of that, something seemed to chain her motionless with her dark eyes fixed full upon the gleaming orbs of the crouching beast. At times there is something marvelous in the effect of a steady, unflinching look directed at a wild beast, and at that moment Ethna Lakeman unconsciously saved her own life by that fixed stare, for the puma seemed to flinch a little and hesitate a moment.

That moment was enough. Just as the beast was settling once more preparatory for the spring, the clear, ringing reports of two rifles fired almost simultaneously woke the morning echoes. The puma gave an upward spring and then came rolling down the slope to lie at the feet of its intended prey, kicking convulsively and clawing the air in its dying throes.

Ethna looked round in wonder to see from what source the shots had come. She saw two young men running swiftly forward from opposite points, each carrying a rifle. One of them she recognized as Dick Bowen, and the other—could it be—yes, it was the handsome young ranger, Mountain Frank!

The two youths came to a halt a few feet apart, facing each other over the body of the dead cat. On Bowen's face there was a look of mingled rage and consternation, while Frank's clear-cut features were lit up with a smile.

"Well, pard," said the young mountaineer, pleasantly, "we were both after the same bird, and it appears that we spotted our game in the very nick of time."

But Dick's only reply was a scowl.

"Frank—Dick!"

The exclamation came from Ethna's lips as she sprung forward with a hand outstretched to each. Dick did not refuse the offered hand, although he noticed with a pang that she had pronounced the name of his hated rival first. As for Mountain Frank, he uttered an exclamation of amazement as he caught the dainty fingers outstretched to him.

"Miss Lakeman!" he cried; "is it possible?"

"Quite possible," she replied, with a hysterical little laugh. "But I am surprised to see you here."

"And I am delighted to see you," replied the youth, frankly, holding fast to her hand with an unconsciously warm and clinging grasp. "I never dreamed of such fortune. How does it happen?"

Dick Bowen had released Ethna's other hand and stepped back a pace to lean upon his rifle and watch the two with gleaming eyes.

Briefly the girl related what had happened to her since midday of the previous day. Frank listened with interest and surprise.

"You have had enough adventures to fill a small-sized book," he asserted, when she had finished. "It is the most fortunate thing in the world that Mr. Bowen and I happened to sight that brute as it was about to leap. If we ever

did a job that we should be proud of, it was when we knocked that creature over. Here, Bowen, let's shake across the corpse, but let's be careful not to have an Irish funeral, for if we do, we shall wake him."

But, Dick did not offer to take the extended hand.

"I don't keer ter shake with *you*," was his rough and pointed retort. "Jest you mind your business an' I'll mind mine."

At this Frank was amazed. He looked at the surly fellow in undisguised astonishment, as he asked:

"What do you mean, Dick? Surely we parted as friends."

"No we didn't nuther! I never saw ye enough ter become a friend ter *ye*; but," he added, "I hev seen all I ever want to of *ye*."

"Why, Dick!" exclaimed Ethna, flushing crimson with dismay.

He turned upon her almost savagely.

"Ther time has come," he cried, "fer you ter make er choice between me an' him. I don't purtend ter hev his smooth tongue or his fine ways, but before Heaven I'm an' *lones* man. I wonder ef *he* kin say ez much? I am reddy ter do anythin' fer you, Ethna—anythin' if it's ter go through fire an' brimstun! How much will *he* do fer you? Here we are standin' face ter face. Choose atween us!"

At that moment, as he stood with his fine head thrown back and his expressive eyes fixed upon the girl whom he literally adored Dick Bowen was little short of handsome. There was a certain wildness about his manner that made it very impressive.

Ethna was so confused and dumfounded that she could not utter a word. Her position was trying in the extreme. If possible, her face became still more crimson and she dared not meet the wondering gaze of the young mountaineer.

Frank was not slow to understand how matters stood, for it was only too plain to see that Bowen was a jealous lover. He also saw that Ethna was greatly confused, and he surmised the truth.

But young Bowen did not give the maiden much time for a reply.

"I kin see!" he continued, hotly. "Your face speaks as loud as words. You refused me once an' I'm er fool ter give ye another chance. I'm in ther way here an' so I'll go, but," his voice breaking a little, "ef *ye* ever want er frien', Miss Ethna, call on me. Ther time may come."

He half turned as if to walk away, but paused to fling savagely over his shoulder:

"Ez fer *you*, Mountain Frank, ez *ye* calls yerself, keep out of Dick Bowen's path! I hope we may never meet ergain."

Then he strode away, not even pausing or looking back when Ethna called his name. In a short time he had disappeared.

"Poor Dick!" said Ethna, regretfully.

Frank was at a loss what to say, but he managed to stammer:

"I am very sorry that this unpleasant scene happened, Miss Lakeman, and—"

"You are in no way to blame," she interrupted. "Please say nothing about it, and let's forget that it ever occurred. Now tell me how happens it that you are here, Frank?" He had asked her to call him Frank when they first became acquainted, and indeed that seemed the only proper way of addressing him, as he had not told what his true name was.

"You know that I promised to find you," he replied, with a significant look that caused her to drop her eyes and blush again. "Besides that, I have business in this part of the country. But, like yourself, I am in a very unpleasant situation."

Ethna was not so sure that her situation was so very unpleasant just then, but she asked:

"How is that?"

"I have lost my horse. I foolishly drove him into a quicksand, and it was a miracle that I did not go down with the poor creature."

"Then how shall we reach Eden Vale?"

"It looks as if we should have to foot it. As for myself, I would not mind the tramp, but it looks as if it will be a severe one for you."

"Oh, I can stand it!" declared the maiden, bravely. "I am not so weak as you may suppose. I have become hardened like a true pioneer since we started for the West."

"But the loss of the horse is not the worst," asserted Frank, with a look of seriousness on his face.

"Not the worst?" she echoed. "What do you mean? Come, sir, don't try to frighten me! Speak out!"

"Well, then, to tell the truth, there is a band of marauding Navajoes in this vicinity. I have

found that the mountains seem to fairly swarm with red-skins."

"Heaven will protect us."

"Possibly, but I had much rather that the red wretches were hundreds of miles away. But you must be hungry, Miss Lakeman. I camped not more than a mile and a half from this spot last night, and had venison for supper and breakfast. I left enough beside the remains of my fire to make a square meal for a picnic party. If some animal has not carried it away, it must be there now. Hadn't we better return to the fire, where you can satisfy your hunger with juicy steak?"

As soon as he mentioned it, Ethna discovered that she was truly hungry, and she did not demur against following the course that he had proposed. Frank declared that he had no use for the skin of the mountain lion and could not stop to remove it, so the dead beast was left lying where it had breathed its last.

To Ethna this mile and a half seemed the shortest she had ever traveled, and Frank was amazed when he discovered that they had almost reached the spot where he camped the night before. He had taken the maiden's arm, for thus he could help her along much better than if she was clinging to his. It is certain that while he was chatting pleasantly with his delightful companion, Mountain Frank kept a very poor watch for red-skins, and had there been any in that vicinity the two would have fallen an easy prey.

When they came in sight of the place where he had camped, Frank halted with a low exclamation of amazement. His eyes fell upon four horses, two of which were pack-animals, eagerly cropping the grass of a green patch; and beside the camp-fire, which had been revived, squatted two men, who were calmly making a meal off the venison that the young mountaineer had deserted.

CHAPTER X.

A WARNING VOICE.

GREAT was the alarm and consternation in Eden Vale when both of the girls, Ethna and Maggie, failed to return at nightfall.

What could have happened?

That was the question that passed from mouth to mouth, and no one seemed to be able to answer it. But it was plain that something had happened, and time spent in useless speculation was time lost. Reasoning thus, Rufus Renan swiftly organized a party and set out down the river to search for the lost ones. Major Lakeman wanted to go, but his wife coaxed him to refrain, telling him that the others could find the girls as well without his aid.

But when the searchers came straggling in from midnight till long after, not one reported finding a trace of the missing maidens. Then there was consternation indeed in Eden Vale. Some of the men declared they had been carried off by Indians and some were confident that they had wandered away into the mountains and lost their way. Only one hinted of the Mystic League and he was silenced with the question as to what the League could want of the girls. But his words set others to thinking.

It was not impossible that the girls had fallen into the hands of the mysterious brotherhood and would be held for ransom.

It was decided to send out several squads of searchers in the morning, and the distressed major announced his intention of accompanying one of the parties at any cost. There was not much sleep in the settlement that night, although some of the men who were to be with the searchers on the morrow were wise enough to obtain a little slumber, knowing that it would "count" on the following day.

With the first gray light of coming day the settlement was astir and the men were gathering for the search. It was decided that about one half of the men should remain at home to protect the place in case there were Indians in that vicinity and they should seize the opportunity to fall upon the place. The searchers were divided into squads under the direction of some particular man, and there were four squads. Major Lakeman was given charge of the largest squad.

Just as they were about to start, the Mad Prophet was seen approaching. With some curiosity the men awaited his coming. He halted in their midst and looked around in solemn silence for several seconds, then he spoke in a solemn voice:

"Are ye going out to seek for the lost ones? I see that ye are! You will find them far away toward the southwest, but you will also find trouble—trouble and death! The Mystic League are there; beware of them! Beware, beware!"

His words impressed them strangely and for a time not a man spoke. Finally, one ventured to ask:

"Are they in the hands of the Mystic League?"

"Not now, not now. But, who can tell what fate will befall them? They are beset with dangers on every hand. The red-men from the south are there, but they are not to be feared as the vile whites who wear black cloths over their faces."

"Tell us, ole man," said Rufus Renan, "shell we fine our chillun unharmed?"

"God knows!" was the sober reply, as the strange man turned his face toward the heavens. "He holdeth us all in the hollow of His hand. Trust in Him."

Not one who heard the Mad Prophet speak who did not feel that there was something in his words. Perhaps the man was not so mad as they had thought him.

"Go!" cried the Prophet, pointing toward the southwest. "Do not delay! They are there, and perhaps they are calling for their parents and friends at this moment. Heed my warning and look out for the terrible League."

Then he waved his hand in a parting salute and turned back toward the mountain on the side of which still burned the fire that he had kindled, the blue smoke curling lazily up into the clear morning air. The men did not wait to watch him depart, but rode away on their mission.

The entire party struck down the river, but the squads began to branch off into the mountains at intervals till at last Major Lakeman's party did so. It happened that his party took the very course followed by Ethna when she left the river.

They had ridden less than hour after turning their backs upon the river, looking sharply for any trace of the missing ones and finding a hoof-print here and there, when they were startled by suddenly coming in full view of a man who was sitting astride a broncho and regarding them over the barrel of a leveled Winchester.

"Hold up a little, pards," commanded the stranger, who was mounted on a broncho and dressed like a cowboy. He wore a hunting-shirt, deerskin leggins, a wide-brimmed sombrero with a cartridge belt for a band, and serviceable high boots with spurs. His face was covered with a full reddish beard. Taken altogether, he was a tough-appearing customer.

The little party halted promptly as they saw that they were covered by the stranger's weapon, and Major Lakeman called:

"Hello! Who are you and what do you want?"

"I reckon I am in the situation t' ask questions," laughed the cowboy; "but I don't mind answerin' yourn. I'm Cowboy Jack, jest up from New Mexico. Heard there is a settlement over here a ways an' am makin' tracks for it. Now who a'e you?"

"I am Major Hugh Lakeman, and these are my friends from the settlement that you have just named. If you are an honest man, we are friends."

"That settles it," declared Cowboy Jack, promptly lowering his rifle. "I didn't know but you wuz mountain outlaws when you popped out inter view, an' that trash an' yourn truly don't mix fer shucks. But, I see now that you look like honest men."

"Yes, and we are searching for two girls who strayed from the settlement last night. My daughter was one of them."

The cowboy started and then after a moment's pause he slapped his thigh.

"I knowed it!" cried he. Then, as he urged his horse nearer he added: "I've seen 'em!"

"What?" exclaimed the major, in great excitement. "Seen them? When—where?"

"When did they disappear?"

"They rode away from the settlement yesterday noon and have not been seen since."

"Now I am sart'in I saw 'em last night jest as dusk. A party of Navajoes had 'em, an' they wuz puttin' fer the southwest. I knew I c'u'dn't git ther gals away alone, so I struck fer the settlement I had heerd of over yon t' git help. It's lucky I run onter you fellers."

This piece of information greatly excited the major. He questioned the cowboy closely about the girls and that worthy gave a very accurate description of Ethna but asserted that he had not noticed the other girl close enough to describe her. He also said that he could lead them straight to the spot where the red-skins had passed him as he lay in concealment the night before and there they could take up the trail and follow till the girls were rescued and the Indians punished. This delighted the entire party, and a man was immediately sent to find the other

squads of searchers and notify them to join the major's party. Then, with Cowboy Jack leading, they pushed on to the southwest as rapidly as the nature of the ground would permit.

"It'll be pretty late in ther afternoon before we strike the critter's trail," said Jack, "Are you fellers provided with grub fer er long trip?"

"Our knapsacks are filled," was the reply.

"That'll hev t' do with whut game we can shoot. This may turn out t' be a mighty long run, but I'm a-hopin' that we'll round ther critters up mighty suddin like."

Jack forced a halt at noon, although many of the men were opposed to it. The cowboy argued that they did not want to kill their horses and themselves. If they could stand it, it was best to give the animals a short breathing and feeding spell.

While the men were eating their dinners the strange black bird of the mountains flew shrieking over their heads. Cowboy Jack dropped the food he was about to eat and shrunk back, a haunted look in his eyes as he gasped:

"The Vampire!"

With feelings of awe the entire party watched the strange creature till it disappeared in the hazy distance, amid the mountain peaks which seemed trying to pierce the sky. Then Major Lakeman turned to their new guide, saying:

"Then you too have heard of this Winged Demon? What do you know of it?"

"Enough—too much!" burst from the lips which were hidden by the bushy beard. Then the cowboy seemed to be trying to gain control of his shaken nerves as he continued: "I'm afraid we shell be onlucky, fer the shader of that critter fell upon us. Wherever the demon bird is seen there disaster and death will be. The Injuns believe that it can speak like a human bein', but I don't know 'bout that. Anyhow, the sight of it is a bad omen."

When the party moved forward once more there was a noticeable gloom hanging over all. The sight of the mysterious bird and the words of the cowboy had not been without effect.

Onward they plunged deep into the mountain wilds. Slowly the afternoon wore away. Finally the major asked the guide if they had not reached the spot where he saw the red-skins and their captives, then Jack confessed that he had missed the place in some way.

"It's all the work of that cussid bird!" he declared. "I never made sutch a blunder before in all my life. But we'll find the place before dark."

However, they did not. Night came and they were forced to camp without striking the trail of the savages of which the cowboy had told them. It was a bitter blow for Major Lakeman.

Barely had they settled for the night and built their fires when a startling thing occurred. A hollow, lifeless voice, which seemed to sound in the air above their heads, was plainly heard to cry:

"You are on forbidden ground! Beware of the Mystic League of the San Juan!"

CHAPTER XI.

MAGGIE AND OLD MISERY.

It is impossible to describe Maggie Renan's relief when she discovered that the animal which had crept upon her in such an alarming manner was a dog. She experienced such a revulsion of feelings that the strange spell which had held her motionless was broken, and she sat up with a little cry of joy. As she made this move the great dog frisked round her in a joyful manner, seeming to be greatly pleased.

"Nice dog!" said Maggie, putting out her hand and patting. "I declare I could hug you! I never did see such a fine dog! Fact is, I am ready to like any dog just now."

At this the dog once more settled on its haunches, elevated its nose and sent a mournful howl quavering through the darkness.

"I wonder what makes him do that?" queried the girl, aloud. "Perhaps he is lost, like me? Perhaps his master is some mean man who has deserted him? I almost know that his master is some mean old wretch."

"Thankee, miss, fer yer good 'pinion o' me. Guess ye hain't fur out o' ther way, by Joe! I'm mean ernal enough the good Lawd knows, an' I'm homblier than 'riginal sin. It's er right good thing that it's dark, fer one square look at me w'u'd be pretty apt ter skeer ther kinks right out o' yer frizzles. He! he! he!"

Chuckling in a queer way, a little old man suddenly appeared close at hand, at sight of whom the dog uttered a "boof" of delight and frisked about more than before. Maggie gave a little cry of surprise, and asked:

"Who are you?"

"Me? I am er wreck o' bygone days—an on-lucky ole waif set adrift on ther sea o' disaster by ther cruel han' o' Miss Fortune. P'raps you hev never met ther last mentioned feemale o' ther ole maid gender? She's er holy terror, an' it wuz her finger-nails that left ther marks on my face that makes it hombly enough ter give ther sun an' moon er shock every time I look at 'em an' knock an ordinary common star clean out o' sight at er glance. Oh, I'm er daisy—in ther dark."

"But, what is your name?" questioned the puzzled girl, who laughed despite herself at the comical manner of the queer old fellow.

"Name? Wal, most people call me Ole Misery, an' I reckon that's good ernal. I had another name onct, but it wuz so blamed long ergo that I've jest erbout fergot it. This hyer purp as hes jest been exhibitin' some o' his musical ability is my dawg Solomon. He is er bright leetle purp, but I swan! he hain't much handsumer than his master. He knows more nor most human critters though. But fer him I reckon I w'u'dn't a' foun' you, fer he smelled ye out."

By this time the girl had concluded that the man was some harmless old fellow of whom she need have no fear. It was quite probable that he would prove a friend to her, in her need. So she said:

"I am in trouble, sir, and I hope you can help me out."

"Hope I kin," nodded the man. "I'm allus reddy ter help ther leddies. I thought ez how ye wuz in trouble w'en I saw ye go streakin' past with that galoot in hot pursuit, so Solomon an' I struck out ter see ef we c'u'dn't do suthin' fer ye, though I didn't more nor hafe 'spect ter see ye erg'in. Reckon you got shut o' ther chap as wuz arter ye, though I dunno how ye done it."

As quickly as possible the hunted girl told her story and both Old Misery and his dog listened with interest. When she had finished, he observed:

"That wuz er lucky fall fer you, fer ef you'd stuck ter ther hoss, he'd shorely captered ye. As it wuz, he went whoopin' off in er wild chase arter ther annymile. He! he! won't he be hill-roarin' mad w'en he ketches ther critter an' finds ther rider gone! Please excuse me while I snicker er few as I think o' it."

And the old fellow laughed again in his odd way.

"But, the Spaniard will be returning soon if he overtakes my pony," said Maggie, apprehensively, now rising to her feet, as if ready for another flight.

"I wish he w'u'd," declared the border vagabond. "I'd jest like ther fun o' interjucin' him ter er, small-sized yearthquake. Ef 'twasn't that I left some frien's waitin' fer me an' tole 'em that I'd be back soon, we'd stop right hyer an' see Mr. Greaser w'en he kem back; but I've bin gone so long now that I fear ther fellers w'at are waitin' will light out, thinkin' I hev deserted 'em. Reckon we'd best be trudgin'."

To this Maggie made no objections and soon they were moving from the spot, the dog following at his master's heels. Old Misery was in a jolly mood and kept up a running fire of cranky sayings and jokes which made the girl laugh now and then and soon restored her spirits till she was almost as light-hearted as ever.

"Tell ye w'at," said the old fellow, with pretended gravity, "we'd make a hill-roarin' team-an'ef I wuzn't so blamed old an' scraggy an' wrinkled an' hombly enough ter break er plate-glass mirror, I'd ax ye ter hitch in double harness with me. But my hopes o' ever capterin' ther heart o' a beaucherful damsel like you be—"

"There, there, you old flatterer!" laughed the girl. "How do you know that I am beautiful? You are piling it on a little too thick."

"I kin see in ther dark like an owl; besides, it hain't so very dark. But I don't want ye ter think that you are goin' ter hev ther fun o' refusin' ter hitch with me, fer ye bain't. Thar hev jest thirteen feemale wimmen from sixteen ter sixty had that privilege, an' I hev shut off at that number. Don't let it break yer heart, Maggie, but I am not on ther mattrymonial market."

"Well, if you get me back to Eden Vale all right I will give you a good hug, anyway."

"Rash girl! you know not what you promise! Wait till you see the full light o' day shine on this ragged-edged countenance o' mine, then you will regret that you ever made such a promise!"

And with such chaff they hurried on till they reached the place where Old Misery had left Shackley and Perry with instructions to wait till he returned; but the fortune-hunters had

disappeared. A close search failed to uncover a trace of them.

"Wal," remarked Misery, grimly, "they hev lit out, that's shore. I dunno jest why, but it may be that that are red-skins round. Ther mountains are full o' 'em."

"What shall we do?"

"Thar hain't but one thing ter do ez I kin see. I will take you ter my hand-out down by ther river, then I'll come back an' see ef I kin find ennythin' o' these fellers. Ter-morrer we'll start fer ther settlement."

Half an hour later Old Misery was guiding a canoe down the river, the frail bark holding besides himself Maggie and the dog Solomon. The old man had suddenly become very moody and disinclined to talk, while he watched both shores keenly. His fair companion said nothing, for she saw that he was troubled about something. Finally the river wound its way between two perpendicular bluffs which rose straight from the water's edge on either hand. Misery held the canoe close under the shadow—or deeper darkness, for there was no shadow—of one of these bluffs and they glided silently onward.

"Now stoop er leetle."

As the words fell from the borderman's lips he gave the paddle a twist that whirled the canoe and sent it straight toward one of the bluffs. Maggie stooped, and a moment later they swept through a mass of vines which trailed to the very water's edge. Then a darkness that was so dense that it could almost be felt closed around them. Still the old man sent the canoe forward, but slowly and cautiously.

Soon there was a slight shock, and Old Misery said:

"Here we are, little woman. Welcome to Misery Hall—perhaps I should say Misery Hole, fer this is er hole in ther ground. Jest wait er jiff an' I will help ye out."

In a short time he assisted her to step from the canoe and she found that she could stand up erect on solid ground. Solomon sprung out of the canoe of his own accord as if quite familiar with the place.

"What kind of a place is this?" asked Maggie.

"It is a cave," was the reply. "I will light a match and give you a chance to look round, though it hain't prudent to have a light here ter-night. Copper-skins are too thick an' they might catch er glimp' o' it, then ther Ole Boy'd be ter pay an' no pitch hot."

He struck a match and held it above his head. As it burst into a bright flame she saw that they were in a small cave with the canoe rocking in the water at their feet. There was very little "furniture" in the place, a couch of dressed skins being the most important article. The trailing vines quite concealed the entrance.

"Now, miss," said the old man, as the match died out, "you kin make yerself quite at home hyer while I am out lookin' arter them chaps as vanished so sudden like."

"But I shall be afraid to stay here alone in the dark."

"You sha'n't stay alone; Solomon shall stay with ye, an' he's better'n two common men. I won't be gone long, an' even ther Winged Demon hisself can't find ye hyer."

"The Winged Demon!" exclaimed Maggie. "What do you know of that horrible creature?"

"I know haydoogins an' scads. I hev seen ther gentle, dark-completed bird once or twice."

"The dreadful thing! I fear it more than a dozen Indians."

"Wal, ye needn't fear it a tall, fer it won't hurt ye. Ther Winged Demon, as it is called, is ther friend o' all honest folks, but ther deadly foe o' ther Mystic League o' ther San Juan. I don't know what ther critter is, but I do know that he got me out o' er bad scrape once w'en ther reds wuz about ter burn me ter ther stake. It circled above them screechin' till they thought ther Great Sperrit was angry an' they let me go. I've swore by ther big bird ever since an' w'u'd like a chance ter shake han's with it. No, Maggie, don't you be 'fraid o' ther Demon. It won't hurt ye."

"But it is such a horrible looking monster."

"Spect that's w'at ye'll say o' me w'en ye gits er chance ter squint at my phiz. Ther bird hain't hafe ser bad ez it looks, but it is strong ez er horse. I reckon it c'u'd kerry you in its claws without much trouble."

"Well, I don't care to have it try," declared the girl, decisively.

"I s'pose not. Wal, I must be goin'. You kin lay down on the hides that an' git er nap, fer you must be tired. Keep Solomon right clost to ye an' ye needn't be skeered. I won't be away longer than I kin help."

The plucky girl consented, and, after telling the dog to remain with her, the old man stepped into the canoe and shoved it out from beneath the trailing vines into the open river. Then Maggie knew that she was alone with the dog.

But, barely had Old Misery left the cave when there came a sudden chorus of triumphant yells followed by the rattling shots of a revolver and sounds of a fierce battle.

Old Misery was in trouble!

As these sounds came to his ears, Solomon started up with a fierce growl and Maggie could see the animal's eyes gleam in the darkness as he listened to the tumult without. Apparently he was eager to take a hand.

Suddenly a shrill, piercing whistle was heard, and without a moment's hesitation the great dog plunged into the water and went swimming and puffing out of the cave, leaving the girl quite alone in the stygian darkness of the place.

CHAPTER XII.

FORTUNE FLUCTUATES.

SITTING alone in the dense darkness of the strange cave which could only be entered from the river, Maggie Renan listened with bated breath to the sounds of battle which came to her ears through the opening concealed by the hanging vines. There were yells, blows and shots, and she heard Old Misery crying:

"Reg'ler leetle jubilee, hain't it, you copper-skinned skunks! Wuz layin' fer ther ole man, wuz ye? Wal, take that, an' that, an' tell us how ye like it. Sail right in an' swaller yer bitters. This year's er reg'ler hillroarin' ole time, by Joe! Jest take keer o' them pimps in th'r watter, Solomon, ole purp! Thet's ther correc' caper! Chaw er hunk outer ther back o' thet howlin' varmint's neck! He, he, he! W'at a large-sized time!"

All this was punctuated with shots, howls, and various exclamations. Gradually the sounds receded, growing more and more indistinct, as if the combatants were floating down the river. Maggie listened with hushed heart till the last indication of the unequal conflict had died out in the distance, then she sunk back on the skins with a hysterical laugh that startled herself.

"What a queer old fellow he is," she said, in a low tone, thinking of Old Misery. "I hope he whipped the Indians, and something makes me feel sure that he did. If he did not—"

She stopped short with a little shudder. What if the old ranger had been killed? How would she escape from the cave, for she had no boat or canoe, and the cave could only be entered and left by the river. The thought of swimming out was simply ridiculous.

"It must be that he has escaped," she said, once more speaking aloud. "I wish he had left the dog with me, as it is terribly lonely here."

But Maggie was weary and needed sleep, and it was not long before she was unconscious of her situation. Her slumber was dreamless and refreshing.

The adventures of the night were not ended, for the sleeping girl was aroused by a slight sound. At first she knew not where she was, but as she lay quite still staring into the blank darkness, she gradually recalled her recent startling adventures and her present unpleasant position. But what had aroused her? She listened closely, and plainly heard the soft dip of a paddle within the cave. In an instant she felt sure that Old Misery had returned, and she sat up, calling to him. There was a brief silence, followed by a low grunt of satisfaction.

It was not the old borderman!

"Heavens!" thought the frightened girl. "Can it be that Costillo has followed me here? The wretch! I will never become his captive again!"

A moment later she felt an iron hand grasp her arm. An involuntary scream broke from the terrified girl's lips, and she began to struggle desperately with her unseen assailant. A great horror seized her, and indeed her position was one to unnerve the bravest girl. Seized in the black darkness of an underground cave by a person whom she had not, and could not, see, and who had not uttered a word! Again and again Maggie's wild shrieks rang in piercing wails through the narrow vault, and she struggled with all her strength. But it was useless. Her captor handled her as if she had been a child. She felt herself lifted from her feet and placed in a craft of some kind, while the person who had seized her also stepped in, holding her quite fast all the while. Then the canoe began to move, and soon they passed out through the hanging vines, and were on the open river. Then by the faint and misty light Maggie saw that her new captors were two hideously-painted Indians!

Heading the canoe down the stream, the red-skinned wh' handled the paddle sent it swiftly along with the current. The unfortunate maiden relinquished her struggles and sunk in the bottom of the craft, quite exhausted by what she had passed through. Fortune seemed against her.

She now began to feel that Old Misery had been killed. The savages had seen him leave the cave, and thus had discovered where the entrance was. If the old man was dead, there seemed to be little hope that she would ever be rescued from the Indians. True, her father and the men of Eden Vale would search for her, but it was probable that they

would never learn her fate. But the brave little maid did not give up all hope. Fortune might turn in her favor.

The Indians scarcely spoke a word as they drifted down the river. Once or twice they spoke in their own language, but of course Maggie could not understand that, and so she did not know what they were saying. Finally they reached a place where the steep bluff at one side disappeared for a short distance, to rise again further down. There the red-skin with the paddle turned the canoe to the shore, and soon Maggie and her captors had landed. The canoe was then concealed, and the three moved back a short distance from the river and halted, the Indians compelling their captive to be seated on the ground, while they also sat down themselves.

Morning was at hand, and a ready above the mountain-peaks the eastern sky was getting a pinkish tint. Maggie wondered why her captors had halted, but they sat in stoical silence, not even speaking or grunting. She finally concluded that they were waiting to be joined by others. If this was true, they were disappointed, for no one came.

Morning dawned bright and beautiful, but the fair captive had no interest in the beauties of nature which surrounded her. Her only thoughts were of her terrible position and possible escape. She would have felt much better if she had been sure that Old Misery still lived.

Finally, with grunts of evident disgust, the Indians arose and prepared to move. They had waited until their own, as well as Maggie's patience was exhausted. The morning hours were passing swiftly.

Apparently fearing that she might attempt to escape, the brutal red-men tied the girl's hands behind her, although she did not submit to such treatment without protesting and struggling a little.

"You are two nasty old things!" she flashed, as she finally ceased struggling and allowed them to tie her. "I wish I were a man and smart enough, I would give you both a licking! Oh, don't I wish Dick Bowen was here! He would shake you out worse than he did the Spanish gentleman."

But, neither of her captors seemed to understand her words, and she ceased to rave when she found that she was talking to ears which might as well be deaf as far as the effect of her hot sentences was concerned.

When they had made her hands secure they forced her to march along with one of the Indians in front and one close behind her. In this manner they traveled for at least an hour.

Suddenly the report of a rifle rung clear and sharp upon the morning air and the red-skin in front threw up his arms with a loud shriek and fell heavily to the ground. For a moment Maggie and the other Indian stood spellbound by the sudden tragedy which they had witnessed. Then once more the rifle of the unseen slayer spoke and the second red sunk in his tracks.

Maggie looked toward the point where a puff of blue smoke was curling up from the top of a large bowlder some distance to the right and saw a young man rise into view, holding in his hands the rifle that had done the deadly work. She gave a great cry of surprise and delight, for she recognized her rescuer as Dick Bowen.

In a few moments the young man was at her side, saying excitedly:

"Miss Maggie, can it be that this is really you! I am clean beat, fer I hadn't an idee that you wuz anywhere but in Eden Vale. Let me sett yer han's free while you tell me how you kem in sech a scrape."

"Oh, Dick!" cried the overjoyed girl between laughter and tears. "I am so glad to see you!"

"I sh'ud think ye w'u'd be, Miss Maggie," replied the youth. "I sh'ud think ye w'u'd be glad ter see most enny one."

"But I am gladdest of all to see you," asserted the excited maiden. "Oh, Dick! I could hug you for this!"

And then, as he released her hands, she not only hugged him but she kissed him also, much to Dick's amazement. The next moment her face flushed crimson and she burst into tears, making young Bowen feel confused and distressed.

"Don't, Maggie!" he exclaimed—"don't cry! I can't bear ter see you cry! What hev I done that you sh'u'd do so?"

But Maggie could not reply, and before Dick knew what he was doing, he held her in his arms trying to comfort her, while her head lay against his shoulder and she gave relief to her overtaxed nerves in a flood of tears. As well as he could, the rough fellow soothed her, all the while asking what the matter was and how it happened that she came to be in the power of the Indians. Finally she managed to sob: "You—you won't think noth—nothing of it, will you, Dick?"

"Of course not," he replied. "What d'yer mean, Maggie?"

"You won't think I was bold to—to kiss you? If you only knew how glad I was to see you!"

Her words gave him a pang as he thought how happy he would have been if only the other had been as glad to see him, but he swiftly rep'lied:

"Of course I won't think ye bold, little one. I know you must be pritty nigh tickled ter death ter see enny one. But do tell a feller all about it."

Then Maggie dried her tears with marvelous swiftness and proceeded to give him a graphic account of her adventures since leaving Eden Vale, to all of which Dick listened with unassumed interest. He expressed his surprise that she could have passed through so much and not be completely unnerved.

"But you see I am not, Dick," she declared, with a merry smile that was like a burst of sunshine after a brief shower. "I am all right now that you have come, for I feel safe now."

He felt a sudden leap of his heart, and with a strange fierceness he cried:

That su'a'n't no one lay harm's han' on you, Maggie 'less they do it over my dead body!"

Then he led her from the spot so that she should not see the dead bodies of her recent captors, and after they had walked a piece, they sat down together and were soon discussing the situation. Dick declared that he would see that Maggie was taken back to her home in safety, but he said that it was a long distance and they really needed horses to make the journey. But the brave little maiden asserted that she was quite able to walk.

They were so busy talking that they did not see two horsemen 'till the latter were close at hand. Then Maggie started up with a scream, crying:

"Oh, Dick, Dick! look there! Jose Costillo!"

One of the horsemen was indeed the evil-faced little Spaniard. His companion appeared to be a mountain ruffian of the lowest type.

With an exclamation, young Bowen leaped to his feet and attempted to lift his rifle, but a revolver in the hand of Costillo's companion checked him, while the man said sternly:

"Ef ye try it, younker, I'll let daylight through ye shore's my name's Dead Shot Don!"

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed Jose, who also held a revolver. "The fair senorita and the *Americano!* *Diabolito!* Square this will make us!"

Then he threw up his hand before Dick could use his rifle, and with the report of the revolver, the youth fell to the ground without uttering even a groan!

CHAPTER XIII.

THE WORK OF THE MYSTIC LEAGUE.

"I'll be hanged!"

Mountain Frank gave utterance to the exclamation, and, although he spoke in a low tone, one of the men by the fire looked up with a start and perceived the youth and the maiden.

"We are detected," said the young mountaineer, as he half-lifted his rifle so that he would be ready to use it instantly if necessary.

The man who had looked up spoke quickly to his companion, who dropped the piece of juicy steak which he was eating and wheeled half-round with his hand on his rifle. For several moments the two parties inspected each other critically.

"They look like miners," said Frank, "and their faces are those of honest men if my ability to read character is worth anything. The best thing we can do now is to go boldly forward and take our chances. I think one of those pack-animals carries a complete mining outfit."

Ethna trusted everything to her gallant companion and they slowly advanced toward the men by the fire, Frank calling heartily:

"Hello, pard's. You seem to have strayed into my kitchen and are making yourselves quite at home, which is perfectly proper. The hospitality of the place is open to honest men."

"No trouble 'bout them," said the older of the men by the fire, who was the veteran prospector, Ike Shackley. "They are nothin' but er young feller an' er gal."

"They do not look very formidable," admitted Ralph Perry, who of course was Shackley's companion.

"All right, younker," returned Ike, lifting his voice a trifle. "Reckon we are honest, but you can't 'most always sometimes tell 'bout sech things by the look of er man. Ef we are intrudin' on your claim, we beg yer pardon. We are not on the jump."

"No intrusion at all," laughed Frank, as he continued to approach with Ethna at his side. "Anything I have is free as water to those who are in need of it, supposing of course that they need it more than I do."

"Waal," drawled the old miner, "you kin putt us on the needy list in some respects. We wuz mighty hungry wen we happened erlong an' saw this good venison left here ter spile, an' so we lit on it. We reckoned the former owner had slid out fer good an' all."

"That is what I had," admitted Frank, "but circumstances alter cas-s, and things took a turn; so I am back again, and if there is any meat left after you have satisfied the cravings of the inner man, I think I can make use of it."

As the youth and maiden came up, the two treasure-seekers arose to their feet and both removed their wide-brimmed hats to Ethna, who returned the salute with a well-bred little courtesy.

"We are prospectin' round here," explained the older man. "My name's Ike Shackley, an' this yere's Ralph Perry, my pard. We claim ter be white men."

"And this young lady, gentlemen," said Mountain Frank, "is Miss Ethna Lakeman, daughter of Major Lakeman of Eden Vale, a new settlement a short distance to the east."

Once more the hats were lifted and salutes exchanged. Then the youth added:

"As for myself, I am Mountain Frank, hunter, miner, scout, or anything that comes to hand."

"An' I'm glad ter meet you, Mountain Frank," Shackley declared, as he grasped the young man's hand and shook it warmly. "You hev got the right look about ye, an' I reckon are er lad ter tie to."

Ralph also shook hands with Frank, then followed explanations. The young mountaineer first told how Ethna came to be there and explained how he had lost his horse in a quicksand. Shackley and Perry expressed their sympathy for Miss Lakeman, and Ralph was quick to offer his horse to fill the place of the one she had lost. Then Ike told his story, making it seem that they were simply pros-

pecting for placers, but not forgetting to relate their adventures of the previous night, although he did not acknowledge that they had improved the opportunity to get clear of Old Misery when he went with his dog in what they considered a fruitless pursuit of the figures which had passed by them as they all lay concealed by the shadows at the mouth of the gorge.

"I know Old Misery well," asserted Mountain Frank, when Long Ike had finished his story. "He is square as a brick and a friend to be proud of. The old fellow is a little cranky, but one does not mind his odd ways after a time. I would give considerable to meet him to-day."

When all was explained to every one's satisfaction, more of the venison was broiled over the glowing coals and the two fortune-seekers finished their interrupted meal. Ethna also ate heartily, the tender steak being washed down by liberal draughts of cool water from Ralph Perry's canteen, which he had filled at a bubbling spring close by.

When the hunger of all was satisfied, they began discussing the situation and laying plans. It was finally decided that they should make the first half day's journey together, although it would take Shackley and Perry considerably out of the course they had intended to pursue. But it would bring Ethna very near to Eden Vale, and possibly the miners might visit the settlement before they continued on their way. Anyhow, Ethna should be provided with a horse till she reached the place, for Mountain Frank agreed to return the animal to its owner.

Finally preparations were made to move and the maiden was given Perry's horse, the young man declaring that he could walk as well as not and it would be an agreeable change from riding. They started, Shackley and Ethna in advance with the pack-animals following, and the two young men bringing up the rear.

In this manner they had proceeded about thirty minutes when Long Ike reined in his horse with a sudden exclamation and the girl gave a low cry of horror, for directly in their path lay the dead body of a man!

In a moment the old miner leaped from his horse and was bending over the body. Then a smothered exclamation of amazement broke from his lips, as he wheeled toward Perry, crying:

"Santa Fe Sim, or I'm a liar!"

He was right; the dead man was the treacherous visitor of the night before! He lay on his back with a bullet in his brain and his sightless eyes staring straight up at the smiling blue sky. On his breast was pinned a paper. As his eye fell on this, Mountain Frank quickly detached it and read aloud:

"*Thus perish all traitors to the Mystic League!*"

"Ther work of them devils!" cried Long Ike.

"Yes, the work of the most dastardly gang of cut-throats that ever cursed the Southwest!" added Frank, whose face had suddenly become very white. "But the day of retribution is coming for the murderers of women and children. The hand of every honest man is turned against them."

"This is the man who entered our camp last night and pretended to be drunk ez er biled owl," explained Shackley. "I reckon he won't never try ter work that racket erg'in. He has passed in his chips."

A short consultation was held, and they decided to bury the body, for if the man had been a treacherous desperado, his skin was white and they could not bear to think of leaving him there to become food for wolves and vultures. Shackley and Perry secured a pick and spade from the outfit, and declined all help from Frank, bidding the young man ride on a short distance with Ethna, so that she might not have the unpleasant sight of the dead man constantly before her till he was placed in his last resting-place.

Slowly the youth and the maiden moved on, Frank walking by the side of Ethna's horse, and seeming quite downcast and moody. Noticing this, his companion attempted to rally him with pleasant words, but she was startled by the look which she saw on his face as he lifted it with a faint attempt to smile.

"Miss Ethna," he said, in a low tone, "the sight of that dead man, together with the words written on the paper which we found pinned to his breast, has aroused unpleasant memories within me—memories which I never hope to banish. This accursed League must be blotted from the face of the earth!"

There was a fierceness to his final words which startled her again. He went on after an instant's pause:

"I did not tell you why I came down into this part of the country—that is, my original reason for coming. I am on a mission of vengeance, and that mission is to destroy the band of murderous wretches known as the Mystic League of the San Juan! This will seem strange to you, but a few words will explain all. I do not like to say much about it. The next year, after the close of the war, my father, mother, sister and myself came to this part of the country with a small party of emigrants who were seeking new homes. Just how it happened I do not know, but the emigrants discovered a buried treasure of immense value; but in some way this League of villains learned that the treasure had been found, and soon the emigrants were pursued by the outlaws. They took refuge in some old *pueblo* ruins on the top of a high, flat-topped mountain, but, disguised as Indians, the murderous League followed them there, and after a desperate battle the emigrants were all butchered, I alone escaping by hiding amid the ruins. My father, mother and sister were killed, but I do not think the miscreants found the treasure which was hidden amid the ruins. Now you understand why I hate the so-called Mystic

League. I shall never rest till they are wiped out of existence to the last man."

As Frank finished his brief explanation, they halted in front of a dark opening in the wall or side of the gorge, which looked like the mouth of a cave.

"We will stop here till Shackley and Perry come up," decided the young avenger.

Ethna did not question him about the massacre on the top of the flat-topped mountain, for he had said that the subject was painful to him, but in her eyes he saw a look of sympathy which was more expressive than words.

They did not have long to wait, for suddenly Shackley and Perry came dashin' round a bend in the gorge, both mounted on the former's horse with the pack-animals galloping close behind.

"Injuns!" shouted the old miner the moment he came in sight of Mountain Frank and the girl.

"Ther varmints are comin' thick ez flies in June!" As if to add emphasis to his words, a wild, savage yell echoed along the gorge!

CHAPTER XIV.

FROM DARKNESS UNTO LIGHT.

In a moment Mountain Frank fully understood the situation, and even as he unslung his rifle he glanced swiftly around to see if there was a good place in the vicinity to stand off the red-skins. At the very first his eyes fell upon the mouth of the cave close by, about one half of which was blocked by a great boulder which would afford excellent protection for any one who should attempt to defend the place, and in a clear, cool manner which did not betray a trace of excitement he said swiftly to his fair companion:

"Run into the cave, Ethna, and trust to us. We will beat off the red devils."

She hesitated a moment, then did as instructed, feeling that he knew what was best. Beside the great boulder she paused and looked back to see Mountain Frank coolly resting his rifle over the saddle of the horse which she had been riding, while a large party of mounted Indians burst into view. Mountain Frank's rifle woke the echoes of the gorge the moment the red-skins appeared, and with the echoes was mingled the death shriek of a savage, as he threw up his arms and toppled from his pony.

"Into the cave there!" shouted the young mountaineer, pointing toward the entrance. "We can beat 'em off there."

Both Shackley and Perry understood, and as they made for the open mouth of the cave Frank fired again, bringing down a pony and sending the rider scurrying to the nearest rocks as a place of refuge from the death-dealing lead.

The effect of the two shots threw the Indians into some confusion, but at the first they had disappeared behind their ponies where it was impossible to hit them except by the rarest chance. From their actors Frank decided that they were Apaches, the most warlike and treacherous of all the races in the great Southwest, and the most perfect horsemen on the face of the globe.

Past the youth dashed the two treasure-seekers to fling themselves from the horse at the very mouth of the cave. As Perry led the animals into the opening, which was sufficiently large, Shackley wheeled, rifle in hand and, dropping on one knee, fired a single shot that dropped another pony. Then, as the rider of that pony was darting swiftly for the nearest shelter, crouching low, Mountain Frank dropped him easily.

"Good boy!" cried Long Ike, with a grim laugh. "That has done the work for the present. See they are getting out of range."

He was right. The discomfited Indians were doing their best to get beyond the reach of the death-dealing rifles, having been greatly surprised by the unexpected reception. Frank promptly improved the opportunity to get into the cave with the last horse.

"There!" he laughed, as he saw Ethna watching him with admiring eyes; "I think we have given those gentlemen a shock that they will not very soon forget. We can hold them at bay here, for I do not fancy that we have seen the last of them."

"Last of 'em," echoed the old miner. "Waal, I guess not! They will be red hot fer our skelps now."

The horses were led back a short distance and concealed behind a projecting point of rocks so that they would not be hit by any of the bullets. Barely had this been done when the report of a rifle outside was followed by a low cry from Ethna as she staggered back a step. In a moment Frank was by her side crying anxiously:

"Are you hurt?"

"No," she answered, with a faint smile; "but that bullet passed so close to my cheek that I felt the wind from it."

Frank turned white, and Shackley said:

"Better take ther young leddy back whar ther won't be so much danger. She may get hit here."

The advice was good and Frank quickly conducted her back into the cave. Just beyond where the horses were concealed the youth noticed a great stone which seemed to hang suspended in the top of the arch-like passage but threatened to fall at any moment. He shuddered as they passed beneath it and hurried on till it was no longer over their heads. He could not help thinking what a terrible thing it would have been if the great rock had fallen while they were beneath it. In the semi darkness beyond they paused, and Frank said:

"You will not be afraid here, will you, Ethna?"

"No," she replied, as she looked back toward the mouth of the cave where Long Ike and Ralph could be seen crouching behind the boulder and peering forth.

"I can see you all out there, so it will not be so

very bad, though it is fearfully dark in there," she added, casting her eyes into the blackness beyond and giving a little shiver.

Again Frank glanced toward the big stone hanging in the top of the arch, and thought of the possibility of it falling and shutting the fair girl in the blackness of the cave. The thought sent a shudder over him; but in another instant he was saying to himself:

"Nonsense! it is foolish to think of such a thing! Probably the stone has hung there for ages and is as solid as the mountain itself."

At that instant Ralph Perry was seen to bring his rifle to his shoulder and take a swift aim. The next moment he fired, and the report of the rifle filled the place with a roar that was fairly deafening. But that was followed by a sound that was both ominous and terrifying, and with a groan, the whole mountain seemed to settle. An instant later the youth and the maiden found themselves standing in a darkness that was indescribable.

For at least thirty seconds they stood quite still, unable to understand what had happened; then Ethna grasped her companion's arm, and asked in a whisper that sounded strangely hollow and muffled:

"What—what is it, Frank?"

"Great God!" groaned the youth. "The big stone has fallen and we are buried alive!"

For some time the knowledge of their awful situation held them chained and motionless, then in the utter blackness of the place they crept closer together, and Frank's arm encircled the waist of the beautiful girl who had been snatched into the heart of the mountain with him. Even then not a word was spoken, but at that moment, although they could not see the faintest outline of each other's face it seemed that an instant understanding was established between them.

As they stood there they could still hear a low crawling movement of the ground as if it was still settling slowly. It was a sound that sent the blood to their hearts, for it told them that the entrance was being closed still more firmly. Fearing that another mass of earth might fall, and they be crushed beneath it, Frank drew his companion still further back into the cave. He was none too soon, for once more there came a rushing roar and they were almost stifled by a mass of dust which whirled around them, telling that the second fall had been much larger than the first.

When the dust had partially settled and the creepy, sliding sound had almost ceased, Frank felt in one of his pockets and produced a metallic match-case, from which he drew forth and lighted a match. The tiny, spluttering blaze showed the youth something that almost caused his heart to cease beating. The roof of the passage had fallen in to within a short distance of them, and the great mass of earth was piled to their very feet!

When the match burned out and fell to the ground, a tiny spark of fire that quickly vanished, Frank once more passed his arm around Ethna's waist and said in a strange, hoarse tone:

"We had better go still further in; there may be another fall."

She did not speak, but allowed him to conduct her through the dreadful darkness. Finally they halted, and she said, faintly.

"I must sit down a moment, Frank; I am so weak."

In another moment he had struck a match, and the light disclosed a small boulder close at hand. Ethna seated herself on this, and the last flickering gleams of the dying match fell upon the faces of two very pale, despairing appearing young people.

When they were in darkness again, the young man threw himself on the ground close beside the stone upon which Ethna was sitting, and her arm stole around his neck, while she asked, hesitatingly:

"Do you think we can ever dig our way out, Frank?"

"Such a thing is impossible," he replied. "There are tons of earth between us and the place where we entered the cave."

"But perhaps our friends can dig in to us, for they have picks and spades."

"That, too, is impossible. Long before they could force a passage through that mass of earth, we should be dead from starvation. Besides that, they may have been crushed beneath the falling mass, although I hope not, as they were quite near the entrance."

"Then must we die here in the awful darkness?"

"God only knows," he replied; "but I hope not. It is possible that there is another entrance to this cave, and if we are fortunate, we can escape by it. Do not lose courage, Ethna, for while there is life there is hope."

"But if we only had a light; this darkness is so terrible."

"I have the matches, but we must save them to aid us in finding our way to the other opening, if there is another. Every match is precious now."

"Frank, do you pray?"

She asked the question seriously, and the young man felt his face get a sudden flush as he replied:

"No, Ethna, but if I did I should feel as much like it now as ever in all my life."

Then the girl knelt in the underground darkness and uttered a brief, simple prayer for deliverance—a prayer that seemed to sink deep into the heart of her single listener. When she finished, he uttered an earnest "Amen."

"Now I am stronger, Frank," she said. "Let's go on and see if we can find our way out."

Together they arose and began groping their way along the passage, Frank keeping his left hand against the dank wall and clinging to Ethna's with his right. They could move but slowly at best, for

they knew not what pitfalls might lay in their path. Every foot of the ground was passed cautiously over, Frank occasionally lighting a match that they might take a look around. For a long time they moved along the winding passage—how long they could not tell, but it seemed hours. They seldom spoke, and when they did their voices sounded hollow and ghost-like.

Finally, the passage seemed to branch off suddenly to the left and they paused while Frank struck another match. The light showed them that the passage had led them to a chamber of whose extent they could only surmise, for the lighted match was unable to penetrate the darkness beyond a few feet. For some minutes they stood discussing the situation, and finally Frank decided that there was but one course to pursue.

"There are probably other passages leading from this chamber," he said; "and we will trust that one of them will take us to the outer world. But for fear that we might make the round of the chamber and finally choose this passage, I will mark it so that we can tell when we come to it."

Lighting another match, he picked up a stone from the rock-strewn cavern floor and with it marked a cross on the soft, crumbly wall close beside the entrance of the passage by which they had reached the chamber. Then they moved forward once more, clinging to each other's hand, while Frank kept his left hand touching the wall as they moved along.

It was terrible to grope their way along through the darkness which was so dense that it could almost be felt, but they had no means of procuring a torch and the little stock of matches must be treasured as if every one were solid gold. Then the possibility of falling into some deep abyss was something which filled them with horror when they thought of it.

It is unnecessary to fully describe their wanderings through the many passages of the great cavern, but they staggered on and on, trying passage after passage and failing to find their way out to the open air. At length they finally found themselves in the great chamber once more, and with a groan of despair the young man sank down.

"What is it, Frank?" asked Ethna, as she knelt beside him.

But he did not speak.

"I know what it is," said the brave girl, with a tremor in her voice. "When we first made the circuit of the chamber that we are now in you counted every passage which led from it. We have tried them all and failed to find our way out. Am I not right?"

"Yes," he confessed, "you are right. This great cave will be our tomb, I fear."

She did not burst into tears or make any other expected expressions of emotion, but she lifted his head into her lap, saying in a singular tone:

"My poor Frank!"

He started up as if stung by an adder. She could not see the expression on his face, but in a voice hoarse with emotion he exclaimed:

"God in heaven! that I should ever hear such words from the lips of one in the position that you now are! Oh, Ethna! do you not think of yourself, so young—so beautiful! To die such a terrible death! Is there a God that can see—"

"Hush, Frank!" and her cold hand pressed his lips. In an instant he caught it and covered it with kisses, saying hoarsely:

"Oh, Ethna, Ethna! would that I could save you by sacrificing my own life a dozen times! I would willingly do it! You know nothing of my bright dreams of happiness—dare I breathe it now? with you, my darling! Dreams that all end in the infernal darkness of this horrible place! Oh—my God!"

There was an intensity in the last words which he uttered that was terrible to hear. Suddenly he clasped her in his arms as if he felt that he was soon to lose something that he prized more than his own life, and with his lips close to her ear, he whispered:

"Ethna, I love you—I have loved you ever since the moment we first met! At first I dared not dream that you would ever be anything to me, but when we parted at the time I started for Denver, your words filled my heart with hope. Since then my mind has been filled with dreams—glorious, heavenly dreams of a life with you!"

But still I was not sure that it was not all folly. I know not yet whether there was a chance of my dreams ever coming true. Now that we are face to face with certain death, I must know if you love me."

"Frank, I love you!"

The next moment their lips met in one long, clinging kiss of pure youthful love.

"We will die together, darling," he whispered. "In death we will not be separated."

"No, dear Frank," replied the brave, true-hearted girl. "we will never be separated again."

For a long time they sat there telling each other of their love happy even as they faced a terrible lingering death, the horrors of which cannot be imagined. At length, being so tired that rest and sleep were absolute necessities, Ethna lay down beside her lover, her head resting on his arm. Then she whispered faintly:

"Kiss me once more, dear Frank. There, now I will sleep, trusting all with God."

Frank was also nearly exhausted from exertion and hunger, for many hours had passed since they were entombed in the cave, and after a time he fell asleep. Thus side by side they slept upon the dank floor of the great cave, and in their dreams they seemed to wane from the horrible darkness of the place to the blessed sunlight and open air—passed from darkness unto light.

CHAPTER XV.

IN THE POWER OF THE STRANGE LEAGUE.

WHEN Old Misery left Maggie Renan in the little cave and swept out upon the open river he was amazed to find himself confronted by Indians in three canoes who were apparently looking for him. They gave a yell of delight at his sudden appearance and drove their canoes swiftly toward him. But the old man was not slow in his movements, and with a revolver in each hand he opened on his many foes.

"I'm right here, big ez life," he gritted.

With remarkable rapidity he sent two warriors over into the water and one of the canoes upset. Then, forgetting that he had left the dog to guard the girl, he gave the usual signal by which he called Solomon, thinking that the faithful fellow would take care of the Indians in the water. And Solomon was soon on hand attending strictly to business.

It was a severe battle, for the old man was greatly outnumbered, but, strange to say, the red-skins seemed determined to take him alive. But, they had caught a Tartar.

Gradually the canoes drifted down the stream till finally the one in which Old Misery was doing his level best to beat off his foes was capsized. The old ranger, however, was an excellent swimmer, and with a long dive he made for a place where a bank seemed to jut out over the water. He came up under the projecting bank and found it a secure place for concealment.

Out upon the river he could see the surviving Indians vainly looking for him to rise to the surface, and he chuckled to himself when he thought how he had fooled them. For some time the red-skins paddled around peering here and there over the surface of the river, but it is needless to tell the reader that they were not gladdened by the sight of the floating body of the pale-face foe whom they so heartily hated. Finally, they paddled away down the river.

When they were gone Old Misery swam down the stream, keeping close to the perpendicular bluff, where every little while he found a chance to cling and rest. In this way he finally reached a place where he could leave the river.

"Wal," observed the queer old fellow, as he wrung the water out of his clothes, "the wuz pretty warm while it lasted, but it wound up with a ray'her cool duckin'. I got erway from ther cusses anyhow, but w'at became of Solomon? I don't believe ther ole purp went under but I can't imagine whar he is. Wal, he allus turns up all right."

And with this thought for consolation, the old ranger started off up the river. He had lost his rifle, but he knew that there was another in the cave and so he was not troubled very much on that account. But the loss of the dog did worry him a little, and as he moved along he whistled softly now and then in a peculiar manner. In the end he was overjoyed when Solomon came bounding to his side, dripping with water and giving utterance to a low bark of delight.

"He! he! ole purp," chuckled the Man from Missouri; "we played it onter ther red varmints the time, didn't we? Oh, we are two keen ole tykes as he sprouted all o' our wisdom teeth. It's menny er scrimmages ther we've bin in an' come out right side up, an' still we're doin' business at ther same ole stand."

The veteran knew where there was another canoe, but it was a long distance up the river. He decided to visit the spot where he had parted with Shackley and Perry, and see if he could find anything of them, then he would hunt up the canoe and return to the cave. This plan he followed faithfully, and it was some hours after daybreak that he found himself floating down the river with Solomon sitting in the bow of the canoe.

"We hain't made er loomin' success o' findin' them felers, ole purp," said the old man, aloud. "I reckon they've slid fer good an' all. Now, we will have ter git ther gal back ter her home in some way."

But a surprise awaited him at the cave, for Maggie was gone! When he made this discovery, the old ranger was fairly furious.

"Ther der'ed copper-skins hev got her!" he cried. "Thar is work ahead fer you an' me, Solomon."

The big dog growled an assent.

"I wuz er gerned fool fer callin' ther purp," muttered the veteran, as he secured the rifle in the cave and loaded it; "but fer ther time I clean fergot ther gal. Wal, sech things will happen on this year'mun-dane spear."

Once more the old man and the dog left the cave, Misery feeling determined to find and rescue the girl if she were alive.

Night was settling over the mountains once more when the ranger and his dog sighted a large party of mounted men in a valley below them. Through the dusky shadows the old man watched them for a time, till at length the darkness shut them from his view; but he had decided from their appearance that they were not outlaws, and that being the case, it was probable they were men from Eden Vale searching for the lost girl! And so it proved when, an hour later, Old Misery and his faithful dog entered the camp of the strangers.

It did not take the border ranger long to tell his story, and the stir that it created may be imagined.

"I knowed that Spaniard was a sneak!" cried Rufus Renan, when Misery had told how it happened that Maggie had failed to return to the settlement. "I could see treachery in his black eyes—I jest could!"

"Waal," came slowly from Cowboy Jack's lips, "ef this old sinner's story's true, them gals whut I saw with ther red pimps c'u'dn't 'a' bin ther ones w'at ye're lookin' fer."

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it?" flashed the little old beld'rman, as he suddenly faced the cowboy.

Seeing that there was trouble brewing, Major Lakeman promptly stepped between the two angry men, saying quickly:

"Slow and easy, friends! Everything looks plain enough to me. Cowboy Jack did not describe Maggie at all, but he did describe my daughter. There are two girls missing, and without a doubt he saw one of them. Who the white girl with her was it is impossible to say now: but, as Maggie has also fallen into the hands of the red fiends, we are on the right track."

His words were sensible, and with a few exceptions all were inclined to think that he had hit upon the truth. Harmony was restored, and the party sat down to discuss the situation, and make plans for the coming day. Old Misery had a plan which he promptly laid before the men from Eden Vale, but for some reason Cowboy Jack had suddenly become strangely silent.

With his head throbbing in an unpleasant manner Major Lakeman arose and strolled away without being noticed so preoccupied were the others of the party. The major did not intend to go far, but his mind was so filled with sad thoughts that he strayed on and on till the sound of voices had died out in the night behind him. Finally, he looked up with a slight start, noticing for the first time how far he had wandered. He wheeled and looked back, but a point of rocky land shut out the camp-fire. His mind was filled with thoughts of his lost child, and suddenly lifting his hands above his head, he cried in anguish:

"My God! I fear I shall see her never again!"

And through the darkness came a hoarse echo from the rocky walls on either hand—a reply that sent the blood in icy currents to his heart:

"Never again!"

The next instant there came a swishing sound in the air, something closed round the major's body and he was jerked violently to the ground. Then several dark forms leaped out of the surrounding shadows and hurled themselves upon him with crushing force. But he was naturally a strong man and he struggled desperately, despite the fact that he had been taken at such an advantage. He attempted to cry out, but something closed over his lips, and a hoarse voice hissed in his ear:

"Be silent or die! You are in the power of the Mystic League!"

CHAPTER XVI.

A DESPERATE GIRL'S MAD ACT.

FAR down in Southwestern Colorado stands a flat-topped mountain, sometimes incorrectly called a mesa, upon which are the ruins of an old *pueblo* or Indian village. The village was built much after the style of the Moqui villages situated on the lofty table-lands of Northern Arizona. The outer walls seem blank and inaccessible, and the houses are of stone, sometimes three or even four stories high, and surround an interior court common to the village. The wall which had once—long years before the ravages of time showed upon it—been continuous on the outer side, is really the side of the houses opposite the inner court. Within the village the houses are built in terraces, each story being set back upon the other.

At the time of which we write it was evident that the village had been deserted for generations, for at one side a breach had been made in the outer wall, and everywhere the hand of time had left its marks. The hand of man was also apparent in some of the work of destruction. Away back in the vanished years the place was probably attacked by a powerful enemy and finally taken, after which the inhabitants were without doubt mercilessly destroyed. At that time the work of ruin was commenced, and several times since then the hand of man has helped it along.

It was there upon that flat-topped mountain that a party of settlers took refuge amid the ruins, and attempted to beat off a desperate band of outlaws, but were finally overpowered and slaughtered. It was there that the strange brotherhood known as "The Mystic League of the San Juan" had their headquarters while they were "operating" in Southwestern Colorado and Northern New Mexico. It was there that they had vainly searched for the treasure that was supposed to have been in the possession of the settlers who had met their doom amid the ruins, and to this search may be accounted the fact that many of the strong walls had been partially torn down. But the hiding-place of the coveted treasure still remained a secret.

Jose Costillo belonged to the Mystic League, and after shooting Dick Bowen, carried his recovered captive to the stronghold of the band.

His companion, Dead Shot Don, also belonged to the brotherhood.

There was but one way of making the ascent to the top of the mountain, and that was steep and difficult for a great part of the way and easily defended. Had not the ammunition of the settlers given out when they were attacked by the outlaws, they could have held them at bay with ease.

When the old ruins were reached, Maggie was amazed to find another girl there who was about her own age and was like her a captive in the hands of the outlaws. Costillo delivered his prize into the charge of the girl, whom he called Nellie, and Maggie followed her through a gap in the lower wall of one of the houses, and then up a ladder till the fourth story was reached. Nellie's private room was there, and Maggie gave a little cry of wonder when she saw it, for it was neatly arranged and as comfortably furnished as many rooms in the East.

Indeed, by the dim light which came through the

two narrow apertures which served as windows, it appeared really cozy and inviting. There were curtains tastily draped at just the proper places, mats on the floor, chairs of the picturesquely rustic kind, an odd little table covered by a bright cloth on which lay a Spanish guitar, tastily worked beaded decorations were to be seen here and there, and through a slight opening in some hanging curtains the astonished girl caught a glimpse of a snowy white bed.

"Why—why?" was all she could say, as she stood looking around in helpless amazement.

"No doubt you are astonished," said Nellie, in a singularly low and sad voice. "Of course you could not expect to find anything of the kind here, but I arranged this room in my spare moments, which are many, for, like yourself, I am an unwilling captive among these terrible men. Some of the men helped me make the furniture. You are to share this room with me, so you are perfectly free to do as you like while here."

Maggie was so tired that she could scarcely stand, and when her pleasant companion placed a chair for her, she sank into it with a sigh of relief.

"And so you are a captive in the hands of these miserable wretches?" she questioned. "How long have you been here?"

"I have been a captive more than three years now, but have not been here all the time. My father, mother, brother and myself were with a party of emigrants who were all murdered on this very mountain by the band who now holds me prisoner. For a time after the massacre—from which I alone escaped, the chief of the outlaws having taken a fancy to spare me—the band remained here, having their headquarters amid these ruins. But, after a time, they all became very much frightened by a huge black bird with the head of an animal—"

"The Winged Demon!"

"That is what they call it," said Nellie. "The bird kept hanging round this mountain and one by one the men who had taken a hand in the murder of the party on the mountain were found dead, and often the terrible bird would be seen upon the body. The superstitious ruffians believe that it is a vampire that sucks human blood, and when every attempt to kill it proved a failure, they grew frightened and fled into New Mexico, taking me with them. They have been working in New Mexico and Arizona till a few months ago when they returned to this place. But they will not stay here much longer, for this so-called demon bird is still here and the men have been dying fast since they came back. They firmly believe that the bird is indeed a demon and cannot be killed, and they also think that it preys on only those who had a hand in the terrible tragedy on the mountain."

"It is retribution!" cried Maggie. "I have seen the bird many times and at first was afraid of it, but I am not now, for I do not believe that it will harm honest people."

Then Maggie told her new-found friend all about herself and the settlement of Eden Vale, and forgetting to speak of the dastardly murder of Dick Bowen, by the Spaniard Jose Costillo.

"I know all about him," declared Nellie, with a shudder. "He is the lieutenant of the League and a very wicked man. He is in charge now, for the captain is away."

"I wish I had a pistol," flashed Maggie. "He killed poor Dick, and I would not hesitate to shoot the assassin like a dog!"

"Hush!" said her companion, warningly.

A light footprint sounded close at hand; then a dark-faced Mexican woman appeared and asked in Spanish if anything was wanted. Nellie ordered water for a bath, and food and drink. This was soon brought, and when Maggie had washed and eaten she felt much better. Nellie now made her lie down on the comfortable bed and have a long nap, from which she finally awoke feeling much refreshed.

"It is sunset now," said Nellie, when she discovered that her fellow-captive was awake. "Don't you wish to go out and take a look from the top of the wall? It is grand."

Maggie was eager to go, and soon they were upon the high wall which encompassed the outer side of the village. All around them were the grand old mountains, whose peaks were lighted by the golden glory of a perfect sunset. The girls could not see the sun itself, which had dropped behind a lofty peak that reared its high head above its companions, but the gorgeous colors which tinged the clouds that hung around the summit were magnificent and fascinating. Far below lay the canyons and defiles which were partially obscured by the dusky haze which was slowly gathering. Here and there the glimpse of some winding stream or river could be caught, but nearly everywhere the shadows obscured them to a dim indistinctness which blended everything into a pleasant harmony. Maggie glanced over the wall toward the valley below, but drew back with a shudder.

"I would like to fall down there," she declared.

"But many times I have been tempted to hurl myself from this wall," asserted the girl, who had so long been a captive in the hands of the outlaws. "Had not the men treated me with perfect respect and courtesy, I should have done so long ago; but I still hope to escape, some time."

"And I am sure you will," was the sympathizing response. "My friends will search for me—"

"But find you they will not, my beautiful." Both girls whirled quickly at the sound of the voice. Jose Costillo stood before them, on the wall! Removing his handsome sombrero, he saluted them in a very effusive manner.

"Sure, I am that you are pleased to see me," he smiled, showing his regular, gleaming teeth. "I

came to take a look at the fair señorita who shall be my bride—the brave Maggie."

"Your wife!" cried the spirited girl, in scorn. "Dastard! Murderer! Sooner than have you lay your vile hands upon me again, I would hurl myself from this wall!"

"The little one speaks very bold," sneered Costillo; "but, she knows not what she says. This night she shall become mine!"

"Stand back! I almost shrieked Maggie, throwing out one hand as if to ward him off. "As there is a God above, I will spring from this wall if you approach another step!"

The Spaniard halted with a smothered oath, for he saw that she was in deadly earnest. He was about to speak again when from directly overhead came a shriek that sent the blood in icy torrents to his cowardly heart and caused him to crouch and cower with sudden terror. Then the dreaded huge black bird sailed slowly along and settled slowly above Maggie Renan's head. The excited girl never knew what impulse directed her, but she made a sudden clutch at the legs of the bird and grasped them with both hands.

A moment later Nellie and the horrified Spaniard saw the mad maiden dragged from the wall, and the shrieking monster seemed to drop like a shot down, down, down, with Maggie clinging desperately to its legs! The two who were left on the wall gazed in speechless horror till the mysterious bird of the mountains and its clinging burden were swallowed up by the dusky shadows far, far below.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE WINGED DEMON SPEAKS!

WHEN the chief of the Mystic League returned to his retreat amid the ruins on the flat-topped mountain he brought a captive with him, and that captive was Major Hugh Lakeman. The unfortunate magnate of Eden Vale was thrust into a dungeon-like room which had been prepared for just such a use, and there for a time he was left to his thoughts, bitter enough it must be confessed.

He knew not how many hours passed while he was confined in the dark hole. Three times food was thrust into the place, and judging by that he thought that at least twenty-four hours must have elapsed.

At length the heavy door of the prison chamber swung slowly open and another prisoner was thrust in to keep the major company. By this time Lakeman's eyes had become accustomed to the gloom and he was able to examine his fellow in misfortune, although not in a very satisfactory manner. However, he fancied that there was something familiar about his appearance, and when he obtained a nearer view of the uncovered head and long flowing beard he recognized the man.

It was the Mad Prophet of the Mountains!

"Well, my friend," said the major, "it seems that you are in trouble, as well as myself."

"Who speaks?" demanded the strange old man, trying to peer through the gloom. "The darkness is so deep here that I cannot see."

The major soon explained who he was and how he came there, after which the Prophet said:

"Ah, yes; I saw you in their hands and I followed them. They discovered me hiding near the trail that descends the mountain and they made me a prisoner. They have good cause to fear and hate me, for I am their bitterest enemy. I have sworn to destroy this fiendish League, and a just God will not let me die till the work is finished."

"Then they have done you some great wrong?"

"Wrong!" cried the hermit, with one clinched hand uplifted, his eyes fairly glowing in the darkness. "They did me a wrong which can only be atoned for by the blood of the murderous devils! On this very mountain and amid these ruins they destroyed all that I held dear in this world! But I have haunted them like a Nemesis. To escape me they fled southward; but I knew they would return, and I waited. They did return, and once more have they felt the hand of the avenger! The end is near!"

The old man had worked himself up to a great pitch of excitement, but, suddenly, he stopped, and bent his head as if listening. From far, far away faintly echoing through the stone corridors came the sound of a sad, sweet voice in song:

"Ah, the fair summer days of my childhood!

I remember them now like a dream;
I remember the hills and the wildwood,
And the old bridge spanning the stream.
When the meadows were fragrant with flowers,
And the days were sunny and fair,
Oft o'er them I wandered for hours,
Light-hearted and free from all care.

"Oh, the days that are vanished forever—

The sweet sunny days of the past!
They will come again back to us never,
They were happy—too happy to last!

"To me then a summer was sweeter

And longer than many are now;
Each year as it passes seems fleeter—
It comes and it vanishes—how!
The June-time may come with its roses,
And summer in sweetness be here,
Yet each year as it passes declines
No joys like those vanished and dear.

"Oh, the days that are vanished forever—

The sweet sunny days of the past!
They will come again back to us never,
They were happy—too happy to last!"

For a few moments after the song was ended the old man stood in a listening attitude as if expecting to hear more; then, with a long deep breath, he said solemnly:

"I have heard the voice of an angel! It is the old song that I used to sing in the dead and vanished years. She knew it too, but she is dead; yet as there is a God in heaven, that was her voice!"

Then, with a wild, inarticulate cry, he threw himself against the bare stone walls and began to beat them with his clinched fists. Major Lakeman saw that it was the act of one whose brain was deranged and he quickly dragged the man from the wall. With a moaning cry that was pitiful to hear, the Prophet sunk to the floor and lay there for an hour sobbing like a child. No words that his fellow prisoner could say comforted him in the least.

After long hours a heavy trampling of feet sounded outside the cell; the heavy door swung open, and the light of several flaring torches revealed six armed men attired in robes of somber black.

"The hour of judgment has come," said one of the men, speaking in a deep and solemn tone. "Prisoners of the Mystic League, come forth and meet your doom!"

To the major's surprise, the Mad Prophet arose from the floor and walked from the dungeon with a steady, unfaltering tread. Knowing that it was useless to hold back, Lakeman followed, feeling that he was going to execution. The black-robed figures silently escorted them along a covered passage till the open court in the center of the village was reached.

It was night, but the interior of the great court was lighted by a host of flaring torches which cast a red and fitful light over the group of dark-robed forms gathered in a square near the center of the walled space. In the midst of the square stood something that caused a chill of horror to thrill the major's frame. It was a rudely constructed gallows.

When the prisoners had been escorted to the foot of the gallows, the Prophet walking with boldly uplifted head and flashing eyes, one of the men in robes stepped forward and spoke:

"The brothers of the Mystic League have pronounced your doom. Your are both to die by the rope, and thus two of our enemies will be removed from our path forever. Your moments are numbered! In less than three minutes you will be swinging from that beam!"

Then he stepped quickly to Major Lakeman's side and hissed savagely in the ear of the helpless man whose hands had been confined behind him:

My hour has come at last! Do you know me?"

"Yes," replied the undaunted man, speaking in a loud voice. "I know you well, Duncan Midas, double-dyed villain and murderer!"

"And I know you all!" asserted the Mad Prophet, in tones that riveted the attention of every one. "Among you stand the last remnant of the murderous band who slew the emigrants that took refuge on this mountain; but not one of them shall escape! You are in funeral robes and your end is near—even at the door! You may destroy me, but above you at this minute hovers a power that you cannot destroy—an avenger that will live to drink the blood of the last of the Mystic League! Listen to the words of the Bird Avenger!"

A shriek that fairly made the old ruins ring with its appalling sound came out of the darkness above when the strange old man ceased speaking. Then, as the men looked up in terror, they saw a huge black form with outspread wings slowly and vaguely appear in the gloom and gradually settle lower and lower. Another shriek; then a croaking, blood-chilling voice came down from the shadowy figure of the black bird hovering over them, and plainly they heard the fearful words:

"Murderers, you are doomed—doomed, doomed!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE BLOOD ATONEMENT.

WITH moans of terror the cowardly cut-throats crouched in their tracks, but the chief of the League, suddenly snatching out a revolver, fired at the huge bird hovering above them.

As if that shot had been a signal for which they were waiting, a band of men swarmed out of the covered passage into the open court, and, with a wild cheer, opened fire on the fear-stricken mass of dark-robed figures.

"Pump it ter ther varmints o' sin!" shouted the voice of Old Misery, followed by the crack of his rifle. "Give 'em a bill-roarin' ole warmin'! At ther pesky critters, Solomon!"

With a roar, the dog shot forward into the fight.

"Surrender!" rung out the clear voice of a young man whom the flaring torches revealed to be no one else than the young ranger, Mountain Frank. "You cannot escape—surrender!"

"Never!" snarled the chief, as he discharged his revolver. "I will die first—ah!"

He fell in his tracks, and that was the end of resistance. The rest of the band, with a few exceptions threw down their weapons and cried for quarter.

Perhaps half a dozen escaped through a breach in the wall; a few were slain, many were wounded, and the rest were taken prisoners. The work was accomplished with a quickness and ease that quite astonished the men from Eden Vale, with whom were the treasure-seekers, Shackley and Perry, Old Misery and his dog, and the young ranger, Mountain Frank. Aided by Solomon, Old Misery had trailed the captors of Major Lakeman directly to the flat-topped mountain, and when the League assembled to witness the execution, it was not a difficult thing to overpower the two men who were detailed to guard the trail. Then the outlaw-hunters made their way cautiously into the ruins, and arrived just in time to save the lives of the major and the Mad Prophet.

The prisoners were quickly divested of the cowl-like hoods which concealed their faces, and a mix-

ture of half-breed Mexicans, Indians and border ruffians was revealed. When the hoods were removed from the dead, Jose Costillo, the villainous Spaniard, was found among them. He had perpetrated his last piece of treachery and crime.

Mountain Frank hastened to relieve the major of the bonds which held his hands behind him, at the same time saying:

"Major Lakeman, we meet again, and it is my pleasure to inform you that your daughter is, without doubt, safe in Eden Vale by this time. We had the misfortune to be entombed together in a great cavern, but while we slept from exhaustion, after vainly trying to find our way out, Miss Ethna dreamed that there was a passage which we had not tried. When she awoke we searched for the passage of her dream and found it. It did lead us to the open air, and by rare good fortune we came upon the party of searchers, two of whom turned back to escort your daughter to the settlement."

"Thank God!" came joyously from the ex-officer's lips, as he warmly clasped Frank's hand.

When the wounded chief of the League was examined, it was found that he was dying. He immediately called for Major Lakeman, and when the magnate of Eden Vale stood looking down at him, he said:

"I failed in securing my revenge, major. As you supposed, I am Duncan Midas, who as Square Sam made a botch of the attempt to take your life. I went to your settlement, not for the purpose of running a gaming-den, but to discover if the place was worth plundering. I was amazed when I recognized you. But after that I played a little trick which you have not yet penetrated, for I am the Cowboy Jack whom you have been trusting as a guide. It was my plan to get my claws on you, in some way, but I did not dream that you would walk so blindly into the hands of my men who were watching for a chance to scoop you in. In the excitement which ensued, when it was discovered that you were missing, I slipped away and joined my men, who were waiting for me. It was all successfully done, but Fate has turned against me at last. My minutes are numbered."

Then he turned his eyes on the Mad Prophet, who was standing near with his arms folded over his breast as he gazed sternly down at the dying man.

"Old man," said the vanquished chief of the dreaded League, "you have been one of my most bitter enemies. Three times have I tried to kill you and failed every time. You have shown that you hated me with an undying hatred. Who are you?"

"I am the only survivor of the party that your cut throats murdered on this very mountain," was the reply. "I escaped as by a miracle, and I swore to hunt your League till it existed no longer. Roland Marline has kept his oath, and the murderer of his family and his friends is atoned for in blood!"

"Roland Marline!" almost shouted Mountain Frank, springing forward and gazing wildly into the strange man's face. "Are you Roland Marline?"

"I am," was the reply, as the mysterious man of the mountain gave a great start of surprise.

"Then you are my father!" was the amazing declaration, and the youth caught the Prophet's hands in a warm clasp. "I also escaped by hiding amid the ruins. I am Frank Marline."

As the old man stood in speechless amazement with the son whom he supposed dead clinging to his hands, there came a joyous cry and a girlish figure darted forward, panting with hysterical delight.

"Father—Frank!"

It was Nellie, who had so long been the captive of the League!

The joy of that reunion must be left to the imagination. The eyes of many of the witnesses were dimmed with tears. When the old man was convinced that he was not dreaming, he clasped his children in his arms and turning his streaming eyes toward heaven, cried aloud:

"Great God, I thank Thee! Now I have something to live for!"

Meanwhile Rufus Renan had knelt by the side of the dying chief and demanded to know where his daughter was; but Midas knew not. He could only tell the anxious parent the story that Costillo had repeated to him. When he heard it Renan gave a groan and said:

"Wo shall find her bones at the foot of the mountain fer suah! She prob'ly feil an' was dashed to pieces on the rocks."

It was not long before the chief of the shattered League breathed his last. Soon after his death a portion of the rescuers were ready to start for Eden Vale. Some remained behind, having the captured outlaws in their charge. They told the others not to wait for them, as they would overtake the party before long.

At the foot of the mountain search was made for traces of poor Maggie Renan, but the hunt proved fruitless.

"I shall never see the little one no mo'!" groaned the anguish-shaken parent. "That bird or some wild animal has kerried her off!"

While they were searching they were joined by the men who had been left in charge of the captured outlaws, but there were no prisoners with them then! Not a question was asked, but all knew that the Mystic League would scourge the country no more. The blood atonement had been enforced!

Morning found the men still searching for the lost girl, but they were finally compelled to abandon the hunt, although they were obliged to almost force Renan to turn his face toward Eden Vale.

But a joyous surprise was in store for the unhappy man.

They had not traveled more than five miles from the flat-topped mountain before they were hailed by a young man who appeared on an eminence, with a

girl by his side. What a shout of joy went up from the throats of all who recognized the two as Dick Bowen and Maggie herself!

Dick Bowen had not been killed by the cowardly shot of the treacherous Spaniard, but had been merely stunned by the shot, and brave little Maggie had been carried in safety to the valley by the huge bird! Fate had brought the two together.

Great was the rejoicing in Eden Vale when all the missing ones had returned. Roland Marline, who suddenly appeared as sane as any one, with his son and daughter were honored guests at Major Lakeman's. Old Misery—whose true name was Oliver Dowd—became a guest at Renan's humble home, and when Maggie not only hugged but also kissed him "for old times," he stammered and actually blushed as he requested Solomon to look the other way a few moments.

But, the old man could not remain in one place a great while, and soon, with his dog and Ike Shackley for companions, he started out into the mountains once more, Shackley having taken the old borderman in as a treasure-seeking partner in the place of Ralph Perry, who, for some reason, had decided to remain in Eden Vale a while.

But, the treasure that was supposed to be hidden amid the ruins on the flat-topped mountain was never found.

One day, while Frank Marline and Ethna were strolling together, they unexpectedly came upon Maggie and Dick Bowen. For some reason Dick's companion looked unusually happy just then, but it was all explained when the young man stepped forward, lifting his hat to Ethna and holding out his hand to Frank, as he said:

"Frank, will you shake with er feller as has acted like er blamed fool toward ye, an' don't deserve ter be spoken to, nohow?"

"Of course I will, Richard!" exclaimed Frank, as he clasped the proffered hand in a hearty grasp.

"Besides that, I don't know as you—"

"Yes, I did!" put in Dick, quickly. "I was blind, but I got my peepers open. Miss Lakeman, kin you forgive me fer ther way I acted toward you?"

Forgive you, Dick!—I have nothing to forgive you for. I hold no hardness; here's my hand."

"I thought I was in love with ye," explained the young man, with evident confusion; "but I reckon I hev found ther one I was in love with all ther time. Here she is, an' we are goin' ter git hitched pretty soon."

"There!" cried Maggie, blushing furiously; "you have let the cat right out of the big, Dick!"

"Never mind," laughed Frank; "it was bound to get out sooner or later. Ethna and I have also decided to link our lives, and perhaps we may agree upon a double wedding!"

As Frank and Ethna were returning to the cabin they espied Nellie and Ralph Perry sitting in a pleasant nook beside the river. The young man was holding the maiden's hand, while he talked earnestly to her in a low tone.

"Cupid is slaughtering hearts by the wholesale!" laughed Frank, as they passed on without letting Ralph or Nellie know that they were seen. "I must look after that young fellow. If he is the right sort, and Nellie loves him, I don't mind having him for a brother-in-law."

"The Winged Demon?" repeated Roland Marline, whose aspect had changed to that of a happy man since he found his children living. "Well, really, with the exception of its head, there is nothing very mysterious about the bird. I imagine that it is one of the great Condor species of South America, and was probably shunned by its kind on account of its deformity, for a deformity I call that head, nothing else. When you get close to it, it does not look so very much like the head of an animal. Its head when closely examined has more the appearance of the head of a strange bird than an animal. I imagine that it came to this country from South America. For some reason it took a liking to me, and I readily tamed it. Just how I succeeded, I cannot tell, for there are some things which I do not seem to remember distinctly."

"Did it suck the blood of dead people? Oh, no! It liked raw flesh, but it could not suck blood, and therefore was not a vampire. Just how that belief originated I cannot tell. I managed it so that the outlaws believed that the creature was a Nemesis for them. The very sight of it filled some of the cowardly crew with the most abject fear, but it is really wonderful how it escaped being killed when they fired on it so many times. However, I fear that the chief wounded it when he fired as it hung over my head in the open court of the ruined *pueblo*."

"How did it talk? Well—ha! ha! I did the talking for it. You see I am a skilled ventriloquist. That explains the strange accomplishment of the mysterious bird."

Yes, it explained everything; but there were some who could scarcely believe the explanation. It did seem that the black bird had been a Nemesis for the Mystic League, for, with the destruction of the League, the creature disappeared, never to be seen again in the Southwest. Whether or not it was hit by the bullet from the revolver of Duncan Midas and died from the effect of the wound was never known, and the disappearance of the "Winged Demon" is an unsolved mystery.

When the rich mineral discoveries at Silverton and Del Norte were heralded to the world, the citizens of Eden Vale were lured from their homes by a golden bait. Nothing save a few rotten and deserted cabins now shows where the settlement in the beautiful valley once stood.

THE END.

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